

Ode to Gallantry

Xia Ke Xing

By Louis Cha

Translated by: Ian Liew; Laviathan, Huang Yushi, Abhay @ <http://spcnet.tv>

Chapter 1 - The Black Steel Symbol (Xuan Tie Ling)

The little beggar had only taken one bite of the fried cake when the corpse suddenly stood up, with the two silver hooks still pierced into its abdomen. Shocked, the little beggar did not dare to move at all. The corpse bent its legs and began feeling the ground with its hands until they touched a fried cake.

The man of Zhao wore unadorned robes and a simple tassel,

his scimitar was bright as frost and snow.

The silver saddle illuminated the white horse,

its wild galloping was like a shooting star.

To kill one man within ten steps,

and not leave a trace within a thousand miles.

To leave with a flick of one's robes after the deed is done,

to deeply hide one's body and name.

To drink with the great Lord of Xinling,

to draw one's sword and raise it high.

To share one's roasted meat with Zhu Hai,

to hold the wine vessel urging Hou Ying to drink.

After three cups a vow will be taken,

and even if the Five Sacred Mountains will crumble it cannot be undone.

When the eyes blur and the ears go warm,

the heroic spirit will appear like a rainbow.

To save the Zhao Kingdom wielding a golden warhammer,

and the city of Handan will first tremble.

The two brave warriors of a thousand epochs,

their might grace the City of Daliang.

Even in death their bones remain fragrant,

and do not shame the heroes of the realm.

Who can remain under the roof of one's study hall,

and read the Book of Great Mystery until one's hair grows white?"

This ancient poem of Li Bai, "Ode to Gallantry", tells the story of Hou Ying and Zhu Hai, two warriors who assisted Lord Xinling of the Wei Kingdom during the Warring States Period. After a thousand years, one can still feel the vigorous heroic spirit of the past when reading the poem. The city of Daliang which is mentioned, is situated near the Yellow River. Later renamed Bianliang, it is now known as Kaifeng City in Henan Province. Although this city has been the capital of numerous Chinese dynasties, the common social practice has remained plain and simple. The generosity and chivalry which were praised in the ancient tragedies has not ceased in later generations.

- by Laviathan

*

There was once a small town called Hou Jian Ji, situated twelve li (about 6km) outside the eastern gate of Kaifeng. The town got its name from Hou Ying, who was once the head of the guards guarding the eastern gate of Da Liang.

It was almost dusk on this particular day, with the peasants going about their daily business, when suddenly there came the rumble of hoofbeats from the northeast. The sounds were getting closer and closer, and judging from the noise, there were probably around 200 horses in total coming this way. "It's probably the army", guessed some, while others kept saying "get out of the way - when the army horses come, they'll run you over."

The horses finally arrived, and the hoofbeats slowed down. The whinnying of the horses could be heard in the town centre, and later on the whinnying seemed to come from all over the place, as if the whole town was surrounded. Some people were understandably concerned that these were bandits. "Oh no, it's those damned chaps" groaned one of the peasants. "Not 'chaps'...." cautioned another. "'masters'... but I've never seen this happen in broad

daylight, though. How weird."

He suddenly stopped as four of the horsemen slowly approached him. At the head of the riders was a man dressed in white, carrying a large sabre. "Old peasant!" he called. "Everybody stays where they are... if anybody moves don't blame my sabre for being blind." He then galloped down the road in a western direction, and the noise of those hooves trotting over the ground made the hearts of the peasants jump.

As he was riding, another seven horses came galloping in from the west side, this time led by a man in black. He wore a hat low over his face, and he ordered "Don't move and everything will be alright. If anybody wants to taste my "sabre noodles" by all means feel free to step forward.". A peasant chuckled and said "I wonder how "sabre noodles" taste like..." he was joking, but before he had finished his sentence one of the riders lashed out with his whip, caught hold of the peasant and dragged him out onto the road with a thump. He then dragged him across the road, and another rider came across and had his horse trample the peasant to death.

About five or six doors away from all the commotion there stood a vendor hawking fried cakes. The stall had a big wok filled with oil, and a few flour dumplings were simmering in the oil. Hunched over the stall was a white-haired man tending the oil. He rolled up a ball of flour and flattened it into a cake, all the while ignoring the events happening in front of him. Taking some sesame, he scattered it over the top of the cake, and using a pair of tongs, lowered the cake into the wok of boiling oil.

By this time, the horses had stopped galloping around town. The seven to eight hundred peasants all around the streets were petrified and didn't dare make a sound. Even crying children were hushed by their parents, and all that could be heard was the leather footsteps of a man walking in slowly from the western side.

This man took his time walking, and to each peasant, each confident pounding step taken felt as if it was taken on their heads. The sun was setting, and the long shadow cast by the man, walking slowly amidst the silence, was enough to make everybody tremble. Only the cake vendor continued with his business, and the man walked right up to the cake stall, stopped, and started looking at the

vendor. He then chuckled coldly.

The vendor looked up, and saw a very tall man with a very fierce look on his face. "Buy a fried cake, sir? Only one coin each." he asked. Using his tongs, he gently selected a cake from the wok and placed it on the wooden tray. "Hand it over!" ordered the tall man, sticking out his hand, and the vendor said "Yes, sir", took the cake from the tray and put it in the hand of the tall man.

The tall man's eyebrows raised up, and he said "At this stage, you still try to deceive me?" He then threw the cake at the vendor, who dodged it calmly and the cake flew past him, landing on the street behind him. The tall man then produced two hooks from his waist and brandished them wickedly before the vendor. ""Even now you refuse to hand it over? You who are surnamed Wu, do you not know when to give up?" The vendor replied "Sir, I think you made a mistake. My surname is Wang. Old man Wang the cake seller - everybody in Hou Jian Ji knows me." "Damn it" replied the tall man. "We've checked this very carefully. You can change your appearance and hide for a year or two, but you cannot hide forever!"

The vendor narrowed his eyes, and calmly said "I heard that Bandit Leader An from the Golden Sabre Bandit Camp was a man who stole from the rich and gave to the poor, and most people in the martial arts world when asked would rate him as a "heroic bandit". Why now must he send some underlings to come looking for a humble fried cake seller?" These words were said with confidence and authority, and were spoken slowly and clearly.

"Wu Daotong!" cried the tall man. "So you're not going to hand it over, are you?" The vendor then changed expression, and his muscles started to tense up, exuding an aura of menace himself. "Since you know my name, and yet you continue to address me without manners... don't you think you're being a bit too brave?" "Only now you know how brave I am?!!" shouted the tall man as he raised his left hook, and using the stroke "The hand arrives and grabs" (shou dao qin lai) hacked down towards Wu Daotong's left shoulder.

Wu Daotong moved to his right. The tall man's hook sliced through thin air, but with a pivot of his left wrist, brought the hook slicing across towards Wu Daotong's back. Wu Daotong ducked under the slice, and lashed out with his right foot. Kicking his stall, he sent the whole pile of burning coals flying towards

the tall man, and at the same time a wok filled with boiling oil flipped in the air towards the tall man's head. The tall man got a big shock and retreated as fast as he could. He managed to avoid the hot coals, but not the splashing oil. With a horrific sound, the boiling oil splashed on his legs, leaving him screaming in agony.

Wu Daotong braced his legs, leapt into the air and landed on the roof opposite, his hands still holding the tongs which were his tools of trade. Suddenly a flash of green appeared and a single sabre was swinging towards his head. Raising his tongs, Wu Daotong parried the blow. Sparks flew as the blow connected, and Wu Daotong's tongs, although dark and nondescript, were obviously made of a very strong alloy. He fended off the single sabre, and suddenly to his left and right a spear and a pair of twin sabres attacked simultaneously. The enemy had already taken up position on the roof as well. Wu Daotong snorted and yelled out "Shameless, you wish to win by sheer numbers?". He stood up straight, separated his tongs and parried the spear with his left hand, while the right hand fended off the twin sabres. His tongs had now become a pair of metal brushes - all this while he had concealed his two brushes by using them as tongs.

Using his brushes, Wu Daotong went on the offensive, aiming for his opponents' pressure points. Despite being outnumbered three to one, he was actually gaining the upper hand. With a cry of "Look!", he thrust his brush at the spear-wielding opponent. With a cry of pain, the man's left leg was struck, and he slowly retreated back down the roof.

On a roof on the northwest corner of town stood a short, thin old man, hands on his hips, coldly watching the three men fight. With a sudden flash, the man with the single sabre received a kick from Wu Daotong's right leg, and tumbled down the roof onto the streets below. The remaining man with the twin sabres, seeing that he had lost the advantage, held position with his twin sabres in a snow flower stance, ready to concentrate purely on defence.

The old man slowly approached, and thrust his right index finger at Wu Daotong's left eye. This stroke was lethal, and as Wu Daotong raised a brush to fend off the finger, the finger deftly avoided the brush and switched target to Wu Daotong's throat. Wu Daotong had already committed to his initial stroke

and, having no way of changing his stroke to fend off the new attack, took a step back. The old man pressed forward, and thrust his right index finger out again, this time heading for Wu Daotong's stomach. Wu Daotong retaliated by thrusting his right brush at the old man's head. The old man continued forward, and in a flash was within the arms of Wu Daotong, having completely avoided the brush attack. He thrust out two palms, aimed for Wu Daotong's chest. Wu gasped in shock, and immediately stepped back. With a sudden rip the old man had tore off a part of Wu's robe at the chest area. Wu didn't even bother to check if he had actually sustained any injury, but braced himself, and utilising the stroke "Wan Bao Liu He" brought both brushes across in an arc aimed at the old man's temples.

The old man didn't even bother to dodge, but continued to press forward. With a sickening crunch, both his palms had landed solid blows on Wu Daotong's chest. Several ribs were fractured with this blow.. and Wu Daotong fell from the roof.

The tall man was standing on the ground below, both legs burned badly by the boiling oil. He was furious with the embarrassment of the initial encounter, but as his legs were injured, he was unable to leap onto the roof to join in the fight. In addition, the old man who had just attacked was a very proud man, and once he was fighting would not have taken kindly to anybody offering assistance. All he could do was watch the fight from below, but seeing Wu Daotong fall from the roof, he got excited and rushed towards Wu, both hooks drawn and thrusting towards Wu's stomach.

The old man, Zhou Mu, yelled out "Leave a live tongue!" but was too late, and both hooks had sunk deep into Wu's stomach. At the same time the tall man gasped, and staggered back. Embedded in his chest were two steel brushes which penetrated all the way and emerged out his back, blood spraying from all four wounds. With a shudder he fell to the ground - Wu Daotong, with his dying breath, had put everything into this last attack, and the tall man was caught completely unawares. Other members of the Golden Sabre Bandit Camp ran to his side and lifted him up but he was already dead.

Zhou Mu couldn't care less whether then tall man was alive or dead, and murmuring something, picked up Wu Daotong. Seeing that he was no longer

breathing, he creased his eyebrows and yelled "Take off his clothes! Search everything!" Four of his men replied "Yes, sir!" and started searching the corpse. All they found was a small bundle concealed in his outer robe. They opened the bundle, only to find a smaller bundle within, all wrapped in oiled cloth. As each bundle was opened, the look of anticipation on Zhou Mu's face got stronger and stronger. In total over ten bundles of oil cloth were removed, and the bundle kept getting smaller and smaller. Eventually he started getting irritated, and the bundle was reduced to a 3-inch by 2-inch bundle. He weighed it with his hands, and screamed "Damn it! What sort of trick is this? Forget this - go in and search the house!"

About ten of the men dressed in black rushed into the house. The cake shop was only about two rooms big, and the ten men went in searching. The sounds of items smashing and breaking rang about as cutlery, furniture and everything else were checked thoroughly. Zhou Mu shouted "Check everything carefully - don't let anything pass you!"

After searching for half a day, it became too dark for them to see anything. They lit a fire, and tore down the entire cake shop, the flour within the building flying everywhere. Amidst the commotion, a little beggar boy darted across the street, and picked up the fried cake that was lying near the drain. This boy, about 12 to 13 years old, had not eaten anything for a few days, and was sitting limply on top of the wall corner. When the tall man threw the fried cake which Wu Daotong had given him, the cake landed near the drain, and the boy's eyes had not stopped staring at the fried cake since. He had wanted to climb down and pick up the cake, but there were too many fierce people around, and he didn't dare move out of fright. In addition, there were those two dead bodies of Wu Daotong and the tall man, and they lay not far from the fried cake.

However, once the sky became dark enough, the light from the torches could not reach the area near the drain, and as such the boy summoned all his courage and grabbed the cake. He was so hungry that he didn't care about the cake being tainted with dirty smelly water, and put the cake in his mouth. He held the cake in his mouth, not even daring to bite or chew, in case the sound of the chewing attracted the attention of the sabre-wielding men around the area. With the cake between his teeth, his stomach felt so much better even though he hadn't

swallowed anything.

By this time the men had already demolished the cake shop entirely, even to the extent of ripping up the floor tiles one by one to check. Zhou Mu saw that there was nothing left to search, and as such yelled "Let's go!". A horn sounded, and the sounds of horses galloping started. The Golden Sabre Bandit Camp prepared to leave, and two of the bandits carried the corpse of the tall man, placing his across one of the horse saddles, and were gone in an instant.

It wasn't until the sounds of the hoofbeats had completely faded away, that Hou Jian Ji started to hear the voices of men whispering again. The peasants were afraid that the bandits would return, however, and as such no one dared to raise his voice. The innkeeper and another peasant carried the corpse of the dead peasant into the shop, and immediately bolted the doors, not daring to come out again. The town resonated with the sounds of locks clicking, doors slamming - people were either locking their doors, or at least shutting them tight - and not long after, the streets were abandoned, and not a sound was to be heard.

The little beggar boy saw that Wu Daotong's corpse was still lying unattended on the streets, and he was scared. He took a small bite, and dared to swallow. He was just about to take another bite when he saw Wu Daotong's corpse move. The boy got a fright, and blinked his eyes only to see the corpse sit up. The boy was terrified, his heart beating uncontrollably, as he saw the corpse stand up on its two feet. The boy's teeth started chattering.

The corpse looked around, but luckily the boy was sitting behind the wall corner, and as such the corpse could not see him. Under the cold rays of the moon, however, the boy could see everything clearly. He could see the corpse bleeding profusely, and the two hooked blades were still impaled in the corpse's stomach. The boy kept biting his teeth together, not daring to make a sound.

The corpse then squatted down, and felt the ground. Upon finding a fried cake, the corpse weighed it in its hands, tore it apart and threw it away. It then found another fried cake, tore it open, and threw it away. The boy felt as if his heart was going to leap out of his mouth any moment now, as the corpse continued searching the ground. The corpse didn't bother with anything else it found, but everytime it found a fried cake, it tore it open then threw it away. As

it continued feeling the ground, it edged closer and closer to the drain. When he got to the wooden tray lying on the floor with over 20 fried cakes on it, it took them one by one, tore them all open, but didn't eat any of them. All were torn in half, and then thrown away.

The lad saw the corpse approach the wall corner and could only think of fleeing. However, his whole body was numb with fright, and his legs had no way of moving. The corpse moved very slowly, and it took an entire incense burning time to tear open the 20 fried cakes it had found on the tray. It could not find any more fried cakes on the floor, and raised its head, looking around. The boy quickly darted back behind the wall, not daring to look at the corpse anymore, when suddenly he got a fright. Although his body was well hidden behind the wall, the moonlight was shining from behind the wall, and the clear shadow of his head and hair was projected on the ground just beside the legs of the corpse. The boy saw the corpse's legs suddenly move again, and with a shriek tried to flee.

The corpse moaned "Fried cakes... fried cakes.." and chased after the boy.

The boy tumbled across the ground as the corpse reached out, trying to grab him. The boy rolled to the side and the corpse lost balance, using its palms to steady itself. The corpse was tall, and its legs were long, and although it stumbled along like a drunkard, it managed to catch up with the boy in just over ten steps. Grabbing the boy's neck from behind, it lifted the boy high into the air.

The corpse mumbled "Fried cake... you.... stole.. my... fried... cake?" In his current position, the boy could not even consider lying, and nodded his head. "You.... you ate it?" asked the corpse. The boy nodded again. The corpse then raised its right hand, and with a rip tore open the boy's shirt, revealing his throat and stomach. "I'll... tear.. open .. your.. stomach.. to get.. it.. back...." threatened the corpse. The boy was absolutely terrified and squeaked "I.. I only took one bite!!!!"

When Wu Daotong was hit by Zhou Mu, and then subsequently stabbed by the tall man, he held his breath and feigned death. After a long while, he woke up. The stomach is a fatal area, but although the wound was very serious he managed to survive. He could only think of one thing, and when he woke up, seeing that the Golden Sabre Bandit Camp had departed, he ignored his injuries,

and set out recovering the item which he had hidden in the fried cake.

He had pretended to be a humble cake seller, making his living in Hou Jian Ji. Although he managed to escape undetected for a while, he was unable to find the original owner of the item. When he heard the horns and saw over 200 horses bearing down upon the town, he knew that they were here for him. The situation was dire, and there was no place for him to hide the item, and as such he hid it in one of his fried cakes. When the tall man ordered him to "Hand it over" he decided to take a risk. He placed the item in the hands of the tall man, and as he expected, the tall man lost his temper and threw it away.

When Wu Daotong woke up from his injuries, he had no way of knowing which fried cake was the one in which he had hidden the item. He tore each one open, but none of them had it. At last he saw and caught the little beggar boy, and thinking that since the boy was so hungry, he must have eaten the entire cake with the item within. Immediately he decided that he was going to cut open the boy and retrieve the item, but he could not find a blade nearby. Gritting his teeth, he pulled out one of the hooked blades in his stomach, and turning the blade around, swung it at the boy's stomach.

As soon as the hooked blade was removed from the body, he felt a sharp pain, and blood started pouring out of his wound like a stream. The blade had almost reached the boy's stomach, but all of a sudden his left hand lost all strength, his fingers loosened and he dropped the boy. The hooked blade swung across, slicing through air, and Wu Daotong looked around, wobbled a bit, then his legs gave way and finally he fell to the ground. This time he was really dead.

The boy scrambled away from the corpse in a complete panic. The events which just happened had frightened him so severely that he could only take a few steps, at which point he fainted, his hands still clutching onto that fried cake from which he only taken one bite.

The moonlight shone on Wu Daotong's body, and slowly moved towards the little beggar boy as the sound of hoofbeats came from the southeast. This time the horses were approaching really fast - barely after the first sound of hoofbeats were heard the horses were already nearby. The peasants of Hou Jian Ji were already extremely ruffled, and now hearing these new hoofbeats made them panic even more, fearing the worst. This time, however, there were only

two horses, and no horns blaring.

These two horses were extremely peculiar. One was black from its head all the way to its tail, but its four hooves were white - this horse was known as "Black Clouds Covering Snow". The other had black hooves, but the whole body was as white as snow - this species was known as "Black Hooved Jade Hare" - both horses were uncommon in the mainland.

The rider of the white horse was a woman dressed in white, apart from a red flower adorning her hair and a red belt around her waist. Hanging from the belt was a sword in a white scabbard. Riding the black horse was a middle-aged man, dressed completely in black. Hanging from his belt was a sword in a black scabbard.

Both riders saw Wu Daotong's dead body with the wreckage around him, and simultaneously let out a sigh. The man lashed out with his whip and caught hold of Wu Daotong's neck, and pulled it up a few feet, allowing the moonlight to shine on his face.

"It's Wu Daotong." said the woman. "It looks like the Golden Sabre Bandit Camp managed to get it." The man retrieved his whip, pulling the body around. "Wu Daotong hasn't been dead long - the blood hasn't even clotted. Let's give chase!" The woman nodded.

The two horses took off towards the west, eight hooves galloping across the ground, the sounds in perfect unison, as if there was only one horse. Both horses synchronised the movement of their front hooves and back hooves together, and looked a magnificent sight. Anybody seeing the horses will know that both were extremely well-trained and without blemish.

Both horses raced past Bianliang, and the road became narrow. The horses were unable to ride side by side, and the woman reined her horse, allowing the man to lead. The man smiled at her, and led on, the woman following close behind.

Both riders had deduced from Wu Daotong's wounds that he was slain by the Golden Sabre Bandit Camp, and that they should have caught up with them by now - but there was no trace of them. The two riders did not know that although Wu Daotong had died recently, the Golden Sabre Bandit Camp left a long time

ago and had already gone very far away.

The horses ran non-stop for two hours, after which the riders dismounted for a rest, and carried on until almost dawn, before they saw campfires in the distance. The two riders exchanged smiles, and dismounted. The woman took the reins of the man's horse, and tied both horses to a tree nearby. The two riders then used their qinggong and approached the camp silently.

The camp didn't look that far, but in reality it was a few li away and the two figures raced across the open plains in silence like a wind. As they got closer they could see a large group of people seated around a few campfires, and judging from the sounds, they were having noodles. The two riders had originally intended to get closer to spy, but in the open plains there was nowhere to hide. They then slowed down about ten yards from the camp, and walked towards the group of people.

Somebody within the group cried out "Who is it? What do you want?"

The man walked forward, his hand clasped together in greeting, and answered with a smile "Is Camp Leader An around? Who am I speaking to?"

The short old man Zhou Mu focused his eyes, and by the light of the fire saw a man and a woman, one in black and one in white, both standing straight. Both were middle aged and the man looked dashing while the woman looked cultured, their clothing blowing in the wind and two swords hanging from their belts.

Zhou Mu thought of two people, and stood up and clasped his hands in greeting. "Oh, it's Master and Mrs Shi of Jiangnan's Xuan Su Mansion!" then yelled out "Hey, brothers, all come here and pay your respects! These two are Master and Mrs Shi, famous north and south of the great river!". The whole camp stood up, and bowed. Zhou Mu thought to himself "Shi Qing and Min Rou don't normally have any dealings with our Golden Sabre Bandit Camp. Here they are at this early hour.. I wonder what they want..... could they be here regarding the item?" He immediately glanced around the plains and saw nobody else, and thought "Even though the swordsmanship ability of these two are good, they can't possibly take all of us on at once, so what's there to fear?"

Mrs Shi, whose name was Min Rou, turned to her husband and said "Martial

brother, this is Old Master Zhou, Zhou Mu of the Eagle Claw Clan". Although she had lowered her voice, Zhou Mu heard her, and found it curious that she would know him, thinking "'Icy Snow Heaven Sword" knows my background?" and said "You're too kind.. Zhou Mu of the Golden Sabre Bandit Camp greets Master Shi and Mrs Shi." and bowed while addressing them.

Shi Qing looked at the people around him and smiled. "Everybody seems to be having breakfast - I have intruded.. please be seated." and turning to Zhou Mu, added "Friend Zhou is too kind. We husband and wife had met "Flying through the skies" Brother Zhuang, Zhuang Zhen Zhong, from your clan, several times before, and that means we're not really complete strangers."

Zhou Mu replied "'Flying through the skies" is my martial uncle." and secretly thought "You're much younger than I am, and yet you refer to my martial uncle Zhuang as a 'brother' - it's obvious you're treating yourself as my senior." Having thought of this, he guessed that the visitors were probably not as benign as they seemed, and readied himself. In the martial world, the concept of "seniority" was a very important one. Juniors should always respect their seniors, and when seniors issue an order, the juniors will find it hard to disobey otherwise they risk being branded as "disrespectful".

Shi Qing saw the look on Zhou Mu's face, and guessed what he was thinking. He smiled and said "Oh, I'm sorry! When I met Brother Zhuang on Song Shan, he told me about the martial arts of your clan, and both of us were very impressed. I have a small favour to ask, and I hope young brother Zhou will forgive me." Having changed his address to "young brother Zhou" it became even more obvious that he was treating himself as a senior.

Zhou Mu replied "If it's something personal, I'll give face to the two of you, and as long as it's within my power whatever your orders are I'll do what I can. However, if it's something to do with the Bandit Camp, my rank is lowly, and I'm not in a position to make decisions."

Shi Qing thought to himself "This man is cunning - before even hearing what I had to say he has basically avoided all responsibility" and said "Then I'll be frank. I wish to check something with young brother Zhou. We husband and wife are searching for a man, his surname is Wu, his name Daotong. He uses a pair of iron brushes as his weapons, and is fairly tall. We heard that over the past few years

he has been disguised as an old man and gone into hiding. He should be living around this area - would young brother Zhou have heard of this person?"

The moment he mentioned Wu Daotong, the entire Golden Sabre Bandit Camp fell silent, and some people put down their bowls of noodles immediately.

Zhou Mu thought to himself "You came from the east, so obviously you have seen Wu Daotong's corpse. If I deny anything, it will make me look like I have something to hide." He laughed and said "That's great! Master Shi, Mrs Shi, what a coincidence. Although my kungfu is lowly, I have managed to do you two a service! This Wu Daotong must have offended Master and Mrs Shi - our Golden Sabre Bandit Camp has already killed him." While speaking these words, his eyes were fixed on Shi Qing's face, gauging his reaction and trying to detect any traces of joy or anger.

Shi Qing smiled calmly. "We don't know this Wu Daotong, and actually, he hasn't really offended us in any way. This sounds funny, but the reason we're chasing this man is because of a certain item he has in his possession."

Zhou Mu's face twitched slightly, before he managed to control himself again. "You have done your research well. We have also heard this news. To be honest, I led the Golden Sabre Bandit Camp today mainly for this item as well." he then sighed and continued. "However, I don't know which bastard came up with this rumour. Iron Brush Wu Daotong died for nothing, and our entire journey seems to have been in vain. Even worse, big brother An might be upset with us for not doing a good job. Rumours have always travelled fast in the martial arts world. If everybody assumed that the Golden Sabre Bandit Camp had gotten possession of that item, and all turned their attentions to us, then it would be quite unfair. Brother Zhang, please give Master Shi and Mrs Shi the details of how we killed Wu and searched his entire fried cake shophouse."

A short man said to the couple "That Wu fellow's martial arts was pretty good, and our squad leader Li, Li Da Yuan, perished at his hands. Squad leader Zhou then attacked, and with two palms struck that Wu fellow from the roof. That strike shattered his bones, ruptured his internal organs..." This man was very eloquent, and dramatised and exaggerated certain details. He talked at length about how they searched the shop, tore down the walls, and dragged the tale on, leaving out only the bit about Zhou Mu getting hold of that small bundle.

Shi Qing nodded and thought to himself "From the moment Zhou Mu saw us, he has been uneasy. Xuan Su Mansion and the Golden Sabre Bandit Camp have never had any friction between each other - if he did not have the item in his possession, he would not need to be so defensive." He knew that whether the Camp had gotten the item notwithstanding, if it was with them then it would most definitely be in the hands of Zhou Mu. Looking around, he saw over 200 members of the Golden Sabre Bandit Camp, most of whom were decent fighters, and realised that it was going to be difficult to win this fight. Although Zhou Mu had spoken to them politely, his words contained various concealed motives, and were definitely not words of sincere friendship. Obviously Zhou Mu was secure in the knowledge that he had the advantage of numbers. He smiled and pointed at a small forest a small distance away to the left. "I have something private I wish to discuss with young brother Zhou. Could we adjourn to the forest to speak?"

Zhou Mu obviously wasn't going to, and said "All of us here are brothers and mates, there's nothing that.." the last three words "cannot be said" were not even spoken when his left wrist was suddenly grabbed by Shi Qing, and he could feel his whole body going numb while his right hand had no strength at all. Zhou Mu was furious, but also shocked. From the moment Shi Qing and Min Rou had appeared, he was completely on his guard, and on the lookout for any signs of aggression. He didn't expect Shi Qing to make his move so suddenly, though, and grab his hand just like that. The "Grabbing hand" technique was always the forte of the Eagle Claw Clan, but this time without even a single exchange of strokes he had already fallen prey to it. He tried to resist the effects with his internal energy, but all his strength had disappeared away. He realised that his important nerve points were being held and he could only sweat.

Shi Qing said "Since young brother Zhou is willing to go, that'd be great!" then turned to Min Rou and said "Martial sister, young brother Zhou and I are heading over there for a short chat, and will be back in a moment. Please wait here for us." He then turned towards the forest, and Min Rou said very politely "Martial brother, please go ahead." Although they were husband and wife, they still addressed each other as martial brother and sister.

The Golden Sabre Bandit Camp saw Shi Qing holding Zhou Mu's hand, laughing

and talking along the way. His wife was staying behind amidst them, and no suspected anything. No one thought that a man of Zhou Mu's ability could have been captured without so much as a struggle.

Clinging onto Zhou Mu's wrist, Shi Qing kept walking faster and faster, and Zhou Mu was forced to keep up or risk being pulled to the ground. The distance between the campfires and the forest was about a li, and before they knew it they were in the forest.

Shi Qing smiled and released Zhou Mu's wrist. "Young brother Zhou...." Zhou Mu angrily interrupted "What on earth are you doing?", formed a claw with his right hand and, using the "Capturing Lion Hand", went mercilessly for Shi Qing's throat.

Shi Qing raised his left hand and lightly tapped the approaching claw, deflecting it to the left. With a claw stroke of his own, he managed to grab both of Zhou Mu's wrists and had them pinned behind his back. Zhou Mu was shocked and furious, and raised his right leg to kick behind him.

Shi Qing laughed and said "Young brother Zhou, why are you so angry?". Zhou Mu suddenly felt both his "Fu Tu" (Capture Rabbit) and "Huan Tiao" (Ring Jump) pressure points on his right leg go numb, and his right leg lost all strength to even kick, falling limply back to the ground. At this point, only his left leg was still firmly on the ground, and if he tried to kick backwards again, his entire body would fall forward. His face was flushed with anger and said "You..... you.... you.."

Shi Qing said "Young brother Zhou has got hold of the item which Wu Daotong had. I wish to borrow it and have a look, please bring it out." Zhou Mu replied "We did get the item, but it's not on me. If you want to see it, we'll have to go back there." He wanted to trick Shi Qing to head back to the campfires, then he could issue the order to attack. It wouldn't matter how skilled Shi Qing and his wife were, they'd never be able to win.

"I don't believe you - I need to search young brother Zhou, please forgive me." replied Shi Qing. Zhou Mu angrily replied "You want to search me? What sort of person do you take me for?" Shi Qing didn't answer and took off Zhou Mu's left boot. Zhou Mu gasped and watched as Shi Qing removed a small bundle from

the boot - the bundle which was taken from Wu Daotong. Zhou Mu was shocked and angry, and stunned. "How... how did you know? You saw me put it in?" Actually, when Shi Qing mentioned that he was going to search Zhou Mu, he noticed that Zhou Mu's eyes involuntarily glanced at his left boot. He immediately shifted his eyes to somewhere far away, but Shi Qing guessed that the item might be hidden in his boot. He was indeed correct.

Shi Qing thought to himself "When that chap was describing the scene with Wu Daotong and his fried cake shop, it sounded very accurate and must have been the truth. Now that I've found the item on you, it seems you must have hidden it from even them, and wanted to keep it for yourself." Touching the bundle with three fingers from his left hand, his face suddenly changed colour.

Zhou Mu stood there, face flushed, and couldn't make up his mind whether he wanted to yell for help or not. Shi Qing said coldly "You betrayed Camp Leader An, do you really want to let everybody know this and get hacked to pieces as punishment?" Zhou Mu got shocked and involuntarily replied "How... How did you know?" Shi Qing replied "Of course I know." He then released Zhou Mu's wrists, saying "Golden Sabre An is a very intelligent man. You couldn't even hide it from me, what makes you think you can hide it from him?"

At this time, the sound of footsteps lightly approaching was heard, and some people had arrived just outside the forest. A loud hearty voice was laughing loudly, and said "Thank you for Master Shi's kind words!" Once the words had died down, three men entered the forest.

Zhou Mu had a look, and immediately his face went pale. These three men were the Golden Sabre Bandit Camp's Camp Leader An Fengri, Second Camp Leader Feng Zhenwu and Third Camp Leader Taoist Yuan Deng. When Zhou Mu recieved orders to pursue Wu Daotong, Camp Leader An never even mentioned anything about sending people out here to back him up or meet him. For some reason, he had now come here personally. Zhou Mu figured that his plan to keep the item for himself, and his failure to do so was now exposed, and his name was disgraced, perhaps even his life was forfeit. All he could say was "Brother An, he... he stole the item!"

An Fengri clasped his hands together respectfully towards Shi Qing, and said "Master Shi's name is famed throught the world. I have long admired you, but

never had the chance to meet you. Our camp is nearby - would Master Shi and Mrs Shi be willing to join us at the camp, and let us play host for a while?"

Shi Qing looked at An Fengri, and saw that he had beady eyes, was of a short build and had a rough look, but when he spoke it was with good manners, without even mentioning his taking of the item, and even invited him back to his camp. However, if he did go to the camp, he didn't think he was going to leave the camp that easily, so he put his hands together in greeting, hiding the bundle in his belt and smiled "Thank you to Camp Leader An..."

All of a sudden, a green flash appeared and Taoist Yuan Deng's longsword had left its scabbard. The sword was thrust towards Shi Qing's wrist, and he yelled "Put down that item first!" This thrust came very fast, but Shi Qing was faster - with a turn of his body he was beside Yuan Deng, taking the bundle from his belt and placing it in Yuan Deng's left hand, saying "For you!". Yuan Deng was excited with glee, didn't have time to think about Shi Qing's motives, and grabbed it. Suddenly his right hand went numb, and his sword fell to the ground.

Shi Qing picked up the sword and thrust it at Yuan Deng's left wrist, yelling "Put down that item first!". Yuan Deng was stunned, and seeing that the sword thrust was barely five inches away from his wrist, and that he had no time to dodge, could only drop the bundle.

Feng Zhenwu said "Good Kungfu!", and without waiting for Shi Qing to pick up the bundle, flashed his single sabre and charged low, hacking towards his leg. Shi Qing's longsword flashed out, this stroke was straightforward but effective - Feng Zhenwu's single sabre hadn't even reached Shi Qing's right leg, and the longsword was already going to pin Feng Zhenwu's brain to the ground.

An Fengri was concerned and shouted "Jian Xia..." (the first half of "Have mercy with the sword") Shi Qing's sword was thrusting straight and pierced his skin. Feng Zhenwu felt his heart grow cold, and closed his eyes waiting for death, but only felt the slight pain. Shi Qing's sword didn't thrust any further, and he did show mercy. The sword point had reached Feng Zhenwu's face, but stopped in time - the strength and direction timed perfectly without error. There was the sound of a slight stab as Shi Qing used the sword to pierce the bundle and retrieve it, before An Fengri's "...Liu Qing" (the second half of "Have mercy with the sword") was heard.

Shi Qing lowered the sword and said "My apologies for the offence" and took two steps back. Feng Zhenwu stood up, retrieved his sword, his face deathly pale. He retreated behind An Fengri, and mumbled a couple of sentences. Whether he was thanking Shi Qing for showing mercy, or scolding him for being too ruthless with his stroke, only he himself knew.

An Fengri unlocked the bronze button on his chest, and from his back, removed a single sabre, unsheathing it. It was already dawn, and the rays of the sun had already started to pierce through the trees. The golden sabre flashed in the sunlight and gleamed around the edges - this was most definitely a very sharp weapon. An Fengri raised his golden sabre and said "Master Shi truly is amazing, and I respect you. I wish to exchange a few strokes with you!"

Shi Qing smiled "Today I feel fortunate to be able to meet a great opponent." He then threw the bundle away. Between the four men, all that was heard was a whistle as Yuan Deng's sword in Shi Qing's hand was thrown. As the bundle hit one of the trees opposite the sword followed and pinned the bundle to the tree, piercing only a small corner and not harming the item within. The speed of the stroke and the smoothness of the execution were not inferior to the two masterful strokes he used to defeat Taoist Yuan Deng and Feng Zhenwu.

As the four men glanced from the tree back to Shi Qing, they noticed that his hands were now holding an ink-black longsword, and they heard him say "Ink sword versus Golden sabre, just a gentlemanly duel. Whoever of us gains a slight advantage in skill shall obtain the bundle - how does that sound?"

An Fengri saw him pin the bundle to the tree, and then offer to settle the ownership of the bundle via a duel, all without any trickery. In his heart he felt a deep respect for Shi Qing and said "Master Shi, after you." He had already heard that the Master of the Xuan Su Mansion, Shi Qing and his wife Min Rou, had exquisite skill with the sword, and having seen him subdue Yuan Deng and Feng Zhenwu, he was left with no doubt. He didn't dare to be overconfident, and swished his sabre three times, ready for action.

Shi Qing, sword tip pointing at the ground, not moving at all, said "Do attack."

An Fengri advanced, his skills still polished and showing no signs of rustiness. Immediately he attacked with his 72 movements of 'Bi Gua Sabre', the most

powerful strokes at his disposal. Each stroke concealed a motive, each motive a separate stroke, and had many variations. Shi Qing raised his ink sword, and initially countered each stroke as he saw it coming, defending rigourously. After 30 strokes or so, a sudden whistle of his sword was heard and the offense began - each sword thrust faster than the last. After another 30 strokes or so, An Fengri could no longer see clearly the strokes Shi Qing was using, and with fear in his heart could only concentrate on defending his vital points.

Both men sparred for over 70 strokes, the sword and sabre not quite connecting with each other, but suddenly a 'ding' rang out and the tip of the ink sword was resting on the back of the sabre, and started to slice downwards along the ridge. This stroke 'Going with the flow' was an orthodox stroke used by the sword to defeat the sabre, and if his skill was good enough, An Fengri could have turned the sabre around to face outwards and the sword would have naturally just glanced away harmlessly. However, Shi Qing's sword was moving amazingly quick, and before An Fengri knew it the sword had already reached his index finger. An Fengri gasped in his heart "My fingers are finished!!" and thought of retreating, but he knew he couldn't do it in time. In the blink of an eye, Shi Qing's longsword suddenly stopped. Not only did it no longer advance, it moved back a few inches. An Fengri knew that Shi Qing was showing mercy, and that there was no point in fighting further. He then let go of his sabre.

However, Shi Qing's sword flicked and intercepted the falling sabre, preventing it from falling and said "You and I had a good fight, and failing to get any advantage it seems that we have to call it a draw." and with a gentle push the sabre was raised.

An Fengri felt very grateful. He grabbed hold of his sabre handle, and knew that after defeat Shi Qing was making an effort to salvage his dignity. He sheathed his sabre and respectfully bowed, using the 'Bi Gua Sabre' signature sabre sheathing movement 'South seas pray to the Buddha'.

After using this movement, he felt even more shocked, and his face changed colour. As each movement was used, he realised he had used the entire 72 movements of 'Bi Gua Sabre' but his opponent had faced this, his main skill, without much difficulty. It was on the 71st movement that Shi Qing had managed to pin his sabre down, and if he had continued with his offense, An

Fengri didn't know if he had it in him to last another 8 or 10 rounds.

An Fengri was just about say a few words of gratitude, when Shi Qing sheathed his sword and clasped his hands together, saying "As Camp Leader An and I are now friends, we no longer need to continue with our duel. If you ever happen to pass by our mansion, please do drop by and let us entertain you for a few days." An Fengri blushed and said "I will most definitely pay you a visit someday." He then moved towards the tree, and retrieved Yuan Deng's sword. He picked up the bundle, and placing the sword and his sabre on the ground, he held the bundle with two hands and walked up to Shi Qing, saying "Master Shi, please accept this." Although the item was gained and then lost, Shi Qing had salvaged his pride and spared his fingers, and as such he totally acknowledged the favour.

Unexpectedly, Shi Qing clasped his hands together, and said "May we meet again!" before turning around to leave.

An Fengri called after him. "Master Shi, please wait. Master did everything to save my face, how could I not know. I had most definitely lost to you. Please take this item, otherwise An Fengri would be ridiculed as a rude and insolent person." Shi Qing smiled and replied "Camp Leader An, today's duel has yet to produce a winner or loser. Camp Leader An's Green Dragon Sabre, Door-Breaking Sabre and other top-class sabre strokes had not even been used yet, how could you admit defeat? In any case, that bundle does not contain what I'm looking for, and I'm afraid young brother Zhou had fallen for somebody's trickery."

An Fengri was startled "... does not contain what you're looking for?" and opened the bundle hastily. He opened one layer after another, and after the fifth layer he found three bronze coins. He looked at the coins all over, back to front and that was all they were.. three bronze coins. He was shocked and angry, and turned to Zhou Mu. "Brother Zhou.... what... what kind of joke is this?" Zhou Mu stammered "I... I don't know. This bundle was really all we found on Wu Daotong's body."

An Fengri cooled down, and realised that Wu Daotong had either stashed the item in a very safe place, or had given it to another person. This entire operation had not only been a complete waste of time, but had also ridiculed the good name of the Golden Sabre Camp. He threw the bundle onto the ground, and looking at Shi Qing, said "How embarrassing, how did Master Shi know?"

As Shi Qing held onto the bundle just now, he had felt the contents and found three small round items, and although he didn't know they were bronze coins, he already knew that they were not the item he was looking for. He smiled and said "I was just guessing. It seems both of us were tricked and I apologise for the trouble.". He clasped his hands, and turned and showed his respect to Feng Zhenwu, Yuan Deng and Zhou Mu, and left the forest.

Shi Qing walked back to the camp, and said to Min Rou "Martial Sister, let's go." Both of them got on their horses and headed back the way they came.

Judging by the look on her husband's face, Min Rou, without asking, already knew that his little venture had not been successful. She felt a sudden pain in her heart, and her tears started falling drop by drop onto her clothes. Shi Qing said "The Golden Sabre Camp was also fooled. Let's head back to the location of Wu Daotong's corpse and look around. Perhaps our friends in the Golden Sabre Camp had missed something." Min Rou knew that it was hopeless, but didn't want to argue, so gently agreed.

The black and white horses were exceptionally fast, and by noon they were back in Hou Jian Ji.

The townsfolk had yet to recover from the fright and as such none of the doors were open. The entire incident was already reported to the officials. The prefect of the area was marshalling his troops, but had not arrived, obviously taking the stand "the later the safer".

Shi Qing and Min Rou dismounted and headed towards Wu Daotong's corpse. They noticed that apart from a 12 to 13-year old child sitting at the wall corner, there was nobody else to be seen. Shi Qing then searched Wu Daotong's corpse carefully, even to the extent of searching his hair, and removing his shoes. Min Rou went to the ruins of the shophouse to have a look.

Both husband and wife sighed at the same time. Min Rou said "Martial brother, it looks like we're not going to be able to take revenge. These few days took a lot out of you. Let's head to the city to relax a while, read some classics and listen to some music." Shi Qing knew that his wife always liked peace and quiet, and did not enjoy music. This proposal to head to the city was entirely for his sake, and so he replied "Sure. Since we're here in Henan, it would be worth

heading to the city for a while. I heard that the silversmith there was a master - we could go there to get some jewelry." Min Rou was known in the martial arts world for her beauty, and had always liked to dress herself up. As she was now getting close to being middle-aged, cosmetics and jewelry became all the more important. She smiled and said "Ever since little Jian died 13 years ago, you've given me so much jewelry that I could open a shop of my own."

The moment she said "Ever since little Jian died.." her tears started flowing again. Glancing around, she noticed that little boy sitting in the corner. "Where is your mother? Why are you a beggar?" The little beggar boy replied "My... my mother is missing." Min Rou sighed and took a piece of silver from her belt. She placed it at his feet and said "Go and buy some cakes to eat.". She stood up to leave, then turned around to look at him again. "Little boy, what is your name?"

The little boy replied "My... my name is Mongrel."

Min Rou was startled, and thought "Why would he have a name like this?". Shi Qing shook his head and said "It's a mad boy.". Min Rou replied "Yes.. how sad and pitiful." Both of them then got on their horses and turned towards the city.

The boy had fainted after seeing Wu Daotong's corpse, and had only woken up at dawn. This time the fright was too much, and he could only stare at the bloody corpse of Wu Daotong. He didn't even dare to stand up and run, and groggily woke up, slept, and woke again. When Shi Qing arrived, he was already wide awake, and was just about to leave. When he saw Shi Qing searching the corpse, he got another fright and couldn't move again. It was totally unexpected when that beautiful lady gave him a piece of silver, and he thought to himself "Cake? I have one here."

He raised his hand, and held tightly in it was the fried cake which he had already taken a bite of. As the feeling of fright slowly passed, the feeling of hunger became unbearable. He opened his mouth wide and bit down hard. He heard a sound, and his teeth started to hurt badly, as if he had bitten a piece of steel. The little beggar pulled at the cake, and there was something left in his mouth. He spat it out into his left hand and saw that it was a piece of black steel.

The boy looked at the piece of steel, and without even thinking as to why his cake would have a steel symbol within, just gulped down the rest of the cake

after checking that there was nothing else inside. He then scanned the area, looking at Wu Daotong's corpse, and the dozen or so fried cakes littered around the area, thinking "I wonder if food touched by ghosts can still be eaten..."

While he was still pondering, a voice suddenly rang out above him "Surrounded from four faces!!!" The beggar boy was startled, and looked up. Standing on the roof were three men all clothed in white, and as he heard a rustling sound behind him, he turned around to see another four figures all clothed in white coming in from the left and right.

In the distance there was the sound of a horse approaching, and a voice shouted "Are you friends from the Snowy Mountain sect? Having arrived in Henan, please forgive me, An, for not entertaining you." A yellow horse rode up to the boy, bearing a short chubby man who dismounted. The horse then retreated, circled around a few times and finally came to a halt a short distance away.

The three men on the rooftop then jumped down, each of them clutching tightly onto their scabbards. One of them, a man of forty-plus years, said "Is it Camp Leader An from the Golden Sabre Camp? Greetings, greetings..." All the time while speaking, his eyes were signalling to the other white-clothed figures behind An Fengri.

When An Fengri had lost to Shi Qing, he had already agreed to give up. However, he thought "Why is Shi Qing heading back to Hou Jian Ji? Oh, Fourth brother Zhou fell for a trick, and didn't get the item. Shi Qing has returned to Hou Jian Ji to search for the item. If he finds it, then of course I, having already lost to him, will not interfere and will just watch. However, if by some chance he still fails, then surely I can afford to search one more time and try my luck. This item was hidden by Wu Daotong - and if I can't find it after searching ten times, searching an eleventh time won't hurt." He then got on his horse and headed to the village as well.

His horse was nowhere near as fast as the black and white stallions ridden by Shi Qing and Min Rou, and of course he didn't want to follow them too closely. It was only after Shi Qing and Min Rou had finished searching the corpse and the ruins of the shop, and headed towards the city that he had arrived at Hou Jian Ji.

When he arrived, he noticed three men in white standing on the rooftop, swords slung over their backs - they had to be Snowy Mountain Sect disciples. Three of them looked very focused, as if preparing for battle, and An Fengri thought that they were about to ambush Shi Qing and his wife. As he bore goodwill towards Shi Qing, he yelled, and hoped to alert Shi Qing and Min Rou to the situation. As he neared, he couldn't see Shi Qing, but the seven disciples of the Snowy Mountain Sect were surrounding a small beggar boy.

An Fengri was puzzled. The beggar boy was young, and his face scruffy, and didn't look like he knew martial arts. But as he saw the white-clothed warriors staring closely at the boy, he took a second look.

This time, he got a shock. He saw that the boy's left hand was clutching a symbol made of dark metal, and looked to be the legendary 'Black Steel Symbol'. He then noticed the four white-clothed warriors moving, as if preparing to take the item from the boy. Without much time to think, he unsheathed his sabre from his back, and used his "Eight Direction Concealed Sabre" stroke, turned around and looked around at the boy. His sabre slashed left, then right, front then back. In a flash he had slashed three times in eight directions, twenty-four slashes in all, each slash less than half a foot from the boy, surrounding the boy with sabre strokes.

The boy felt the force generated by the sabre, his whole body shook, he shouted "Waaah" and burst into tears.

At this time, the seven warriors in white each drew their swords, forming a bright net, and ran in a circle around An Fengri and the boy. A bright white circle, with a small golden circle within. Within the smaller golden circle was a small beggar boy's crying, with tears and runny nose.

Suddenly, there was the sound of horses, and a black horse, followed by a white horse, arrived from the west - Shi Qing and Min Rou had turned back from their journey to the city.

As Shi Qing and Min Rou were on the way to the city, they noticed traces of the Snowy Mountain Sect disciples, and after discussing, decided to turn back. As he saw the eight people before him ready to clash, he yelled out "Friends of the Snowy Mountain Sect, Camp Leader An, we are all friends. Let's discuss

things cordially, please don't hurt the peace."

The seven white warriors stopped their blades in unison, but kept the swords pointing at An Fengri.

Shi Qing and Min Rou drew closer, and saw the boy holding the steel symbol in his hand. Both sighed in unison, but weren't sure if the item was the item they were looking for, and both of their hearts were beating excitedly. Shi Qing leapt down and approached the boy. "Young lad, what is that item in your hand? May I have a look?" Shi Qing was very calm and collected, and these two sentences were spoken gently. He had already decided that once the boy sticks his hands out he would snatch the item from him. He was sure An Fengri would not interfere, and given his position the Snowy Mountain Sect warriors would not be able to stop him in time.

The white-robed warrior said "Master Shi, we saw him first."

Min Rou dismounted and approached. She said "Brother Geng, please ask the lad as to whether I gave him that piece of silver at his feet?" This sentence was clear, in that as she had given the lad the piece of silver, she had seen the boy well before the Snowy Mountain Sect had.

The warrior's surname was Geng, his name Wanzhong, and was one of the better fighters in the current second generation of the Snow Mountain Sect. He said "Mrs Shi, even if you had seen the lad first, we were the first to see this "Black Steel Symbol"."

The moment they heard the words "Black Steel Symbol", Shi Qing, Min Rou, An Fengri all thought the same thing - "So it is the Black Steel Symbol." The other six members of the Snowy Mountain Sect also showed the similar reaction on their faces. In truth none of the seven actually had a good careful look at the item in the beggar boy's hands, but judging from the reaction of the Shi couple and the Golden Sabre Camp Leader, and how interested they were in the item, it was assumed that this must be the item. On the other hand, the three people Shi, Min and An were thinking the same thing - Geng Wanzhong of the Snowy Mountain Sect was a very respectable character, and as he had shown interest in the item it couldn't be wrong.

Ten people all had the same intention, and all together they stuck out their

palms "Little chap, give it to me."

All ten of them were thinking the same thing. None of them dared to use force, as they knew that the first person to use force would be attacked from the sides by the others, and they could all only hope for the boy to give it to them.

This poor little boy had no idea that the thing they all wanted was that metal piece which had hurt his teeth, and by this time had already stopped crying. Utterly confused, however, his eyes started to fill with tears, and look about ready to start crying again.

Suddenly, a low voice echoed around saying "Give it to me instead!"

A shadow slipped through the circle, reached out its hand, and grabbed the steel symbol from the hands of the beggar boy.

Shouts of "Drop it!", "What?!", "How dare you!" and "Damn!" resounded. Nine swords and one golden sabre moved simultaneously towards that one single figure. An Fengri was the closest to the little boy and raised his sabre, utilising the "White worm facing the sun" stroke and slicing towards the figure's head. At the same time the seven Snow Mountain disciples moved in unison, and seven swords thrust at seven different points, closing in from all angles, intending to prevent the figure from defending any single point. Shi Qing and Min Rou, for their part, could not tell clearly as to who the figure was, and as such did not wish to use any stroke which might kill. Both of them moved their swords in a half-circle, cutting off the figure's retreat.

After a few clashing sounds, the figure suddenly out of nowhere managed to grab An Fengri's sabre and the seven Snow Mountain sword within his hands. Shi Qing and Min Rou suddenly felt a numbness in their wrists, and their swords went flying out of their hands towards the back. Shi Qing's face was a white as a sheet, while Min Rou's face flushed red. When the Xuan Su twin swords combine forces, few people could resist them and not face defeat, but to have their swords thrown from their hands with a simple tap on their blades was something that neither of them had ever experienced before.

As they stared at the man, he stood upright with one golden sabre and seven swords held by his side. He wore a green robe, had short hair, and looked about fifty years of age. He had clean features with a slightly greenish complexion

about his face and his eyes radiated an inexplicable joy. Shi Qing thought of somebody and said "Would elder be the master of this Black Steel Symbol?"

The man laughed. "The Black and White Swords of the Xuan Su Mansion have been touted among the martial arts world for their swordsmanship... that fame is not hollow indeed. I focused one tenths of my attention on handling these eight friends over here, and had to expend nine tenths of my attention on you before I could force you two to unhand your weapons. Ai... my "divine flicking finger" kungfu.... I certainly have a "flicking finger", but how can I claim to be "divine"? Looks like I'll need to practice hard for another decade or so.."

As Shi Qing heard this, he no longer had any doubt. He clasped his hands together and said "We husband and wife have travelled to Henan, and had originally intended to visit elder in the Skyscraping Cliffs. Although now our plan has come to nothing, at least we managed to meet elder, and hence our trip has not been totally in vain. Our little inadequate swordsmanship would probably not even be worth a laugh in elder's eyes. Today elder has recovered the Black Steel Symbol by yourself - congratulations!"

The Snow Mountain disciples listened to Shi Qing's words, and started to think to themselves "This green-robed man is the Master of the Black Steel Symbol Xie Yanke? He managed to take our weapons with just one stroke - if it wasn't him who else could it be?". The seven of them stood there looking at each other, not daring to say a word.

Although An Fengri's martial arts were not exceptionally good, his experience was way above that of the seven Snow Mountain disciples. He said "Apologies for the offence. I hope Master Xie will forgive us for our ignorance."

The green-robed man was indeed Xie Yanke of the Skyscraping Cliffs. He laughed "According to my normal rules, you people attacked me with weapons, and hence I would most definitely return the favour. You used a Golden Sabre to chop at my left shoulder - of course it would only be fair if I used this same sabre to chop at your left shoulder." As he said this he twirled the Black Steel Symbol within his left hand, and smiled. "However, I'm in a particularly good mood today, so let's just treat this chop as done. You thrust at my throat, you went for my "Ring Leaping" nerve point on my thigh, you aimed at my left waist, you sliced at my calves, ..." As he spoke, his right hand pointed at each individual

Snow Mountain disciple.

The seven of them listened to his narrative, and it was completely accurate. In that flash of a second, he had seen each individual stroke, and memorised all of it in detail. They then heard him say "All of these will go into an account, and some day when I'm in a bad mood I'll come back and collect!"

A short member of the Snow Mountain sect then shouted out "We're not good enough, and we have lost. What's the point of all this airy talk? What is there to collect? Just kill us now and get it over with - we wouldn't bother remembering such debts in our hearts." This man was Wang Wanren, and he was unarmed. By issuing such words, he was already prepared to surrender his life to his opponent. His martial brothers shouted together to try and stop him, but he had already said all of it in one breath.

Xie Yanke nodded his head and said "Okay..", raised Wang Wanren's longsword and thrust forward. Wang Wanren immediately retreated, trying to dodge, but the sword came too fast and Wang Wanren's body was caught in mid-air, the sword heading straight for his throat. Xie Yanke flicked his wrist, and immediately withdrew the sword.

Wang Wanren's legs touched the ground, and felt a cool breeze around his throat. Looking down, he gasped - there was a hole in his clothes, the size of a teacup, at his throat - Using just a flick of his wrist, Xie Yanke had cut a round circle in his clothes. All three layers of clothing were neatly sliced, exposing the flesh beneath. A slight push from Xie Yanke, and Wang would have been dead.

Wang Wanren's face turned as dark as earth, and was in complete shock. An Fengri watched with utter admiration, and could not stop himself from saying "Great swordplay!"

With regard to the actual placement of the sword strokes, as well as the delicate nature of the act, Shi Qing and Min Rou could also have performed the stroke Xie had just done, but to achieve such speed, such that the opponent knew exactly where you were aiming for but yet not be able to do anything about it.... Shi Qing and Min Rou were nowhere near that class. Both of them exchanged a glance, thinking "This man's martial arts are exquisite, completely beyond our imagination."

Xie Yanke laughed, and turned to walk away.

A young lady from the Snow Mountain Sect then called out "Mr Xie, please wait!". Xie Yanke turned around and asked "What is it?" The girl replied "Mr Xie showed mercy, and did not hurt our elder brother Wang. We are grateful for the favour. May I ask, this steel piece you're taking away - is it the Black Steel Symbol?" Xie Yanke was irritated, and replied "What if it is, and what if it isn't?" She replied "If it isn't the Black Steel Symbol, then we will all have to continue our search. However, if it is, then you're not exactly doing the right thing."

Xie Yanke's face flushed green for an instant, and then receded again. Geng Wanzhong shouted "Martial sister Hua, don't say too much!" Everybody knew that Xie Yanke was a cruel man, and that he was neither good or bad, but did everything at his own fancy. Countless members of the forces of light and darkness had fallen before him, and today, it was an out-of-this-world mercy that he had faced ten people in battle and not hurt any of them. However, Hua Wanzi was a very straight person, and not knowing the gravity of the situation, chose to challenge him. The Snow Mountain disciples and the Shi couple both felt a cold sweat as they feared for her safety.

Xie Yanke raised the steel piece in the air and announced "The Black Steel Symbol, any favour will be answered!" He then lowered it, and mumbled "Xie Yanke of the Skyscraping Cliffs..." then said "Black steel is very rare in the world, and neither sword nor sabre can penetrate it." He then raised a longsword, and brought the piece of steel against it. With a clang the sword had snapped into two, the tip flying away while the steel piece remained unscathed. He then raised it again and shouted "Who dares say it isn't mine?"

Hua Wanzi then said "This humble girl heard that some friends in the martial arts world say that Mr Xie had three Black Steel Symbols, each one handed to an old friend who Mr Xie owed a favour to. It was said that as long as anyone had the symbol, and handed it personally to Mr Xie's hands, that person would be able to make a request and no matter how hard it is, Mr Xie will undertake to accomplish it. Is that true?" Xie Yanke replied "Of course. Everybody in the martial arts world knows about this!" and a measure of pride was detected in his tone. Hua Wanzi then added "I also heard that two of the Black Steel Symbols have already been returned to Mr Xie's hands, and since then the martial arts

world had experienced two great earth-shaking events - is this also true?"

As Xie Yanke heard her say ".. martial arts world had experienced two great earth-shaking events.." he felt even more proud, and replied "Yes. The friend I gave this symbol to was very good at martial arts, and there wasn't anything which he couldn't accomplish, and as such he never needed it. He also didn't have any children, so when he died the symbol was lost. Over the years many people have been searching for this symbol, hoping to get this chap surnamed Xie to help them accomplish something big. Heh - unfortunately, today it was so easily recovered by myself. This has probably disappointed quite a few friends in the martial arts world, but at least it also removed a potential danger." He then kicked Wu Daotong's corpse a few yards away. "Take this chap for example, he may have gotten the symbol, but he couldn't find me. Before he could hand me the symbol he had already lost his life. Who doesn't want to kill others for the privilege? Who doesn't want to gain the symbol? Even the cultured Xuan Su Mansion's Shi couple couldn't resist the lure, what more other people? Heh.. heh.." This last phrase contained an unmistakeable mocking tone to it.

As Shi Qing heard the comment, his face flushed red. He had always been very courteous, but his martial arts were good and his name was famous. When he spoke very few people would dare to offend him. As Xie Yanke mocked him, he realised that he had no way of retorting, as he had neither ability nor good reason to do so. He was always a proud man, and now he felt totally humiliated, like he had no place to stand. Min Rou looked at her husband, and if he showed any hint of charging Xie Yanke she would throw everything she had at him. Even if she knew they had no chance of winning, there was no way she would let this insult just pass.

Xie Yanke continued "Mr and Mrs Shi are true heroes, and if you got hold of this symbol, you'd simply request for me to do something difficult - that's fine with me. However, if the symbol fell into the hands of some petty evil miscreants, and they asked this old man to cripple myself, forcing me to not live nor die, or forced me to commit suicide, and if I didn't want to die, then I'd go against the oath "Any favour will be answered". At least my luck was good this time, and got the symbol back so easily.. Ha ha ha ha.." He let out a hearty laugh which shook the roofs.

Hua Wanzi said "I heard that Mr Xie swore an oath that regardless of who it was who gave you the symbol, you would answer his request. In addition, even if it was a rival from seven generations, you undertake that you would not hurt him. You obtained this symbol from this little friend's hands, how do you know that he has no request for you?" Xie Yanke spat on the ground, and said "What is this little beggar? I, Xie Yanke, have to listen to a little beggar? What a joke!" Hua Wanzi then said "Friends, let's listen, Mr Xie says that a little beggar boy is not a person, so he doesn't count." If she was talking about some other person, everybody would have burst out laughing, or at the very least the Snow Mountain party would have given her support, but at the moment the four directions were silent, and even the sound of a needle dropping could probably be heard.

Xie Yanke's face flushed green again, and thought "This brat is challenging me with words, and asking her friends to speak behind my back that I am not a man of my word." then thought further "Aiya... this is bad, perhaps this beggar boy was a deliberate trap set by these people, and since I've taken the symbol from his hands, I cannot go back now." He then smiled coldly and said "There's nothing in this world which can be too difficult for the surnamed Xie. Little beggar, follow me. What you wish of me doesn't concern these other people." He then grabbed the hand of the little boy. He didn't really care about the other people here, but he was afraid that they would issue orders behind the boy's back, and come up with a very difficult request, asking him to cripple his hands, and then he wouldn't know what to do. It was better to bring the boy somewhere safe, and then ask him.

Hua Wanzi stepped forward and said softly "Little friend, you are a good boy. This uncle here loves to kill people. Quickly beg him that from today onwards he will never kill..." but before she could finish, she felt a strong wind before her face, and the last words "another person" were stuck in her stomach, and she could not speak.

Hua Wanzi had known that Xie Yanke was a man of his word, and she had thrust her sword at his face before. He said he would collect some other day, and someday, sometime, she was going to have Xie Yanke thrust his sword at her face. As for her six martial brothers, with the exception of Wang Wanren, each

of them still owed Xie Yanke a sword thrust. If this debt was collected, it would mean their deaths. This is why she risked her life, unafraid to incite Xie Yanke's wrath, asking the little beggar to beg that he not kill another person. If the request was made, Xie Yanke would be forced to submit, and she and her other five martial brothers would be saved. Xie Yanke saw through her plan, however, and with a flick of his robes forced her to swallow her sentence. He then shouted "Who needs a brat like you to speak so much?" and waved his robes again. Hua Wanzi couldn't find her balance, and fell to the ground.

Once Hua Wanzi's back fell to the ground, she stood back up immediately, ready to continue, but she saw that Xie Yanke was already very far away, his hands holding on to the little beggar boy's hand. Obviously he didn't want the boy to hear any more from the people over here.

The other people saw Xie Yanke knock Hua Wanzi down just by waving his robes a yard away. Given such power, nobody dared to chase after him.

Chapter 2 - A Young Man In Deep Trouble

Suddenly, a horsewhip came flying out of the sedan chair and curled itself around Wang Wanren's left leg, before casting the man aside and seizing the Inky Sword in his hand. Hua Wanzi drew the White Sword out of its sheath and pushed it towards the horsewhip in an upward movement. Just then, a small object struck her on the wrist.

Shi Qing took two steps forward, and raised his clasped fists towards Geng Wanzhong and Wang Wanren. "Younger Brother Geng, Younger Brother Wang, this younger sister here has courage and insight so remarkable that they exceed those shown by men. She must be none other than the jianghu's(1) well-known Woman Warrior of the Winter Plum, Sister Hua. As for the other four brothers, would Brother Geng please introduce us."

Geng Wanzhong's face became stern. Instead of responding to Shi Qing's request, he said, "There is nothing better than meeting you, Manor-Master Shi, and your wife here, for it saves us a trip to Jiangnan."

By then, Shi Qing had realised that these seven people were not friendly at all. He had initially thought that the seven were sore after being defeated by Xie Yanke, yet he had always been on good terms with Geng Wanzhong. Both of us has just met in a place far away from home, so should the meeting not be a joyful one? Why is Geng Wanzhong so detached and cold? He has always referred to me as "Elder Brother Shi", but why has he suddenly changed the form of address? Then, a thought hit Shi Qing: Could my precious son have created some trouble?

He quickly put the question forth: "Brother Geng, did my naughty little boy make you angry? Please allow my wife and me to offer our apologies. Come, come, come, I will play host and invite all seven of you to a drink inside Bianliang City."

When An Fengri saw how friendly Shi Qing was towards the disciples of the Snow Mountain School, and how the very same disciples did not bother to cast a single glance at himself, he realised that it was not even necessary for him to introduce himself or make any exchange of greetings. Standing alone in the

sidelines, he was put off and upset by what he had seen: Hmmph, what is so great about the Snow Mountain School anyway? If they treated others with the same benevolence and uprightness shown by Manor-Master Shi, they would gain true respect from others.

Hence, he turned to Shi Qing and Min Rou, clasped his fists and said, "Manor-Master Shi, Mrs Shi, I take my leave."

Shi Qing returned the honour and replied, "Stockade-Master An, please do not take offence. My son, Shi Zhongyu, is studying the arts under the tutelage of Elder Brother Feng at the Snow Mountain School. In my eagerness to ask after my son, I have forgotten to be courteous to you."

Well, I cannot blame you then, thought An Fengri. So, he responded aloud: "Well said, well said!" Then, he turned and led his men away.

Geng Wanzhong and his group did not utter a single word until An Fengri and his men were long gone. Even then, they looked at one another with awkward expressions on their faces, as if they were upset and embarrassed at the same time. No one seemed willing to open his mouth and speak.

Shi Qing had sent his son to study martial arts under the tutelage of the Dragon of Wind and Fire Feng Wanli of the Snow Mountain School for an important reason. The child had been excessively stubborn and stupid, yet Min Rou had sheltered him in simply too many ways. Consequently, he had not been able to discipline the child. Now, looking at the faces of Geng Wanzhong and the others, Shi Qing began to fear that his son had created a sizeable disturbance at the school. So he smiled and said, "Greetings to Old Master Bai and Mrs Bai; greetings to the Dragon of Wind and Fire Brother Feng."

By then, Wang Wanren could no longer contain himself. He bellowed: "My teacher and his wife are considered fortunate to have survived the irritation of your little ... little ... little ..." He wanted to say "little bastard" but a glance at Min Rou's worried and pitiful countenance eventually forced him to restrain himself and swallow the last word after uttering "little" three times.

Although he had stopped himself from using the derogative, everyone knew what he had wanted to say. After all, this act of not scolding anyone was as good as a generous helping of verbal abuse.

Min Rou's eyes turned red. "Elder Brother Wang," she said, "my Yu'er is really terribly mischievous. Since he has offended all of you, I ... I ... I will offer my apologies first." She sank to the ground in a deep curtsy, prompting the seven disciples of the Snow Mountain School to return the gesture in a hurry.

Wang Wanren raised his voice and said, "Mrs Shi, this little ... little ... fellow that you have given birth to is really too worthless for words. If only he bears half a fen (equivalent to about 5%) of similarity to you and your husband, then ... what else is there to say? I would not consider him having offended me. Besides offending my teacher and his wife ... that Elder Brother Bai of mine has such a fiery disposition ... Manor-Master Shi, I do not mean to live off one person while secretly helping another, but I must inform you that my Brother Bai is going to burn your Xuansu Manor(2) down. You ... you had better avoid him. As for your offer of drink, I cannot accept it regardless of what you may say. If Brother Bai finds out, it would be strange if he did not fall out and sever all ties with me."

Despite the lengthy speech, nothing was divulged about the mistake that Shi Zhongyu had actually committed.

Shi Qing and Min Rou became increasingly concerned: We have always had a good relationship with the Snow Mountain School, so why is Bai Wanjian so furious that he must burn Xuansu Manor down? Thus, they could not help themselves but reply: "Damn that audacious boy! How could he even dare to offend Old Master Bai and his wife?"

"We should not linger in this place of conflict," said Geng Wanzhong. "Let us find another place to talk." He pulled his sword out of the ground and added, "Manor-Master Shi, Mrs Shi, after you."

Shi Qing acknowledged the request with a nod and headed towards the west with Min Rou. Their horses followed after them at a leisurely pace.

Along the way, Geng Wanzhong introduced Shi Qing to five of his brothers and sisters-at-arms who responded with courteous words of admiration for the couple. After seven or eight li (about 3.5 to 4.0 km), they came upon three chestnut trees, standing ramrod-straight by the road.

Geng Wanzhong spoke first: "Manor-Master Shi, can we speak over there please?"

"Very well," replied Shi Qing.

The party of nine went under the generous canopies of the trees, and sat down on several rocks and the roots of the trees themselves. By then, Shi Qing and his wife were extremely anxious, yet they did not venture to make any queries.

Geng Wanzhong began: "Manor-Master Shi, you and I have always been on friendly terms, so do not take offence with the unpleasant words that I am about to say. In my humble opinion, it is still better for you to hand your son over to us. I will do my best to plead his case before my teacher and his wife, as well as my Brother Bai and his wife, and perhaps enable your son to get away with his life. Even if he ends up losing all his martial arts abilities, it is still better than having both our families become enemies and get into a fight."

Shi Qing was mystified. "I have not seen my son even once after he went to your school three years ago," he said. "I really do not know what has happened, so I hope that you will tell me everything, Brother Geng. You do not have to conceal the facts." He had always addressed Geng Wanzhong as 'Worthy Younger Brother Geng', but now that the latter seemed to be very angry, he feared that this very term of address might be met with a strong rebuff.

"Do you really not know?" asked Geng Wanzhong.

"No!" answered Shi Qing.

Geng Wanzhong knew Shi Qing well. As the Master of Xuansu Manor, the latter had a reputation of such renown that he would certainly not deceive anyone with lies. Since he had declared that he did not have any knowledge about the matter, his words had to be true. Hence, Geng Wanzhong said, "So, you really have not idea what has..."

By then, Min Rou could no longer contain herself. "Is Yu'er not in Lingxiao City(3)?" she asked, interrupting Geng Wanzhong as he spoke.

He nodded.

Wang Wanren said, "If that small ... small fellow was still in Lingxiao City, a hundred lives would not have been sufficient to keep him alive."

Anger crept into Shi Qing's heart: I ordered Yu'er to study martial arts under your tutelage because of my respect for Old Master Bai and Brother Feng, as

well as my high regard for the pugilistic techniques of the Snow Mountain School. So even if Yu'er is young, stubborn and innately stupid, you should still consider our dignity when our son violates the rules of your school. You cannot have him killed as you wish. Furthermore, if you say that your Snow Mountain School excels in martial arts and is thus able to overwhelm us by sheer numbers, does reason really not exist anymore in the realm of the rivers and lakes?

Yet, Shi Qing remained calm and collected. Responding in a unaffected voice, he said, "I have known long ago that the rules of your school are very strict. I sent my son to Lingxiao City to study martial arts because I wanted him to be more disciplined."

Geng Wanzhong's countenance became slightly sterner. "Manor-Master Shi, that is an overstatement," he said. "Shi Zhongyu's ridiculousness, shameless and extreme viciousness are not the products of having studied at our Snow Mountain School."

"He is only a young child," Shi Qing responded in a calm voice. "Where do we begin to describe him as ridiculous, shameless and extremely vicious?"

Geng Wanzhong turned to Hua Wanzi and said, "Sister Hua, please go and look around, and see if anyone has come."

"Yes!" answered Hua Wanzi. She took up her sword and walked away from the group.

Shi Qing and his wife exchanged a glance. They knew that Geng Wanzhong had sent Hua Wanzi away because he was about to say something that would normally not be brought up before women. Hence, their hearts could not help but fall deeper into worry.

Geng Wanzhong sighed. "Manor-Master Shi, Mrs Shi," he said, "as you know, my Brother Bai does not have any sons, but a daughter instead. That niece of mine is only thirteen years old this year. She is a clever, witty, innocent and lovable girl. Brother Bai loves her dearly, while my teacher and his wife treat her as if she is their own hearts and livers. My niece can be considered the little princess of Lingxiao City, and we adore her as if she is a phoenix."

Shi Qing nodded. "So that unworthy son of mine has offended the little princess, has he not?" he asked.

"'Offence' is a very mild way of putting it," answered Geng Wanzhong. "He ... he was so bold and reckless that he actually had our niece bound by the hands and feet, before having her stripped totally naked with the intention of violating her!"

"Ah!" cried Shi Qing and Min Rou as they leapt to their feet in shock. The latter turned deathly pale as well.

"How ... how can that be?" asked Shi Qing. "Zhongyu is only fifteen years old. There must be an misunderstanding in this matter."

"We initially thought that it was extremely ridiculous as well," said Geng Wanzhong. "But it has turned out to be absolutely true. The two maids who served my niece rushed into the room when they heard the sounds of struggle and shouted out for help at once. One of them had an arm hacked off, while the other had a thigh chopped off. Then, both of them lost consciousness. The presence of the maids and the alarm they had raised alerted your son, so he did not dare to attack my niece again. He fled the scene after that."

The martial arts circle had always placed a premium on self-control in sexual matters, even among those who were involved with the Dark Deeds (hei1 dao4) of robbery, murder and arson. These crimes were often deemed as the day's work for these men, but anyone among them who committed a sexual offence was despised by all. Hence, even bandits, thieves and other members of the Green Wood (lu4 lin2 dao4) were not easily moved to rape or violate a woman, much less someone who was held up as a member of a chivalrous organisation.

Consequently, Min Rou became so distressed at the news that colour drained from her face. Tugging at her husband's sleeve, she asked, "What ... what are we going to do now?"

Shi Qing was deeply shaken by the unexpected news as well. If he had heard that his son had killed someone, gotten into deep trouble or broken some rules, he would have accepted the responsibility on the boy's behalf regardless of its magnitude. Yet, he was now at a loss, for he did not know how this issue should be dealt with.

Gathering his thoughts, Shi Qing said, "In that case, the Heavens have extended their protection to Miss Bai. She is still as pure as jade and as chaste as

ice, for that unworthy and unfilial son of mine did not violate her, did he?"

"No!" answered Geng Wanzhong with a shake of his head. "Although that is the case, the issue remains. You know how my teacher is when it comes to things like this. He ordered us to track the young fellow down at once, saying that anyone who spotted the boy could have him killed immediately. To my teacher, it was unnecessary to have him seized alive."

Wang Wanren chipped in: "My teacher says that his friendship with you goes beyond the superficial, so if the young fellow is captured, he will have to you due consideration and spare your son's life. Hence, it would be simpler to have the boy stabbed to death outside."

Geng Wanzhong shot him a sideways glance, as if reprimanding him for speaking more than necessary.

"Our teacher did give us these instructions," said Wang Wanren. "Did I say it wrong?"

Ignoring him, Geng Wanzhong continued his conversation with Shi Qing: "It would not have been such a serious matter if your son had hurt only two maids. My niece may be young, but she has a fiery and unyielding personality. She was so ashamed after suffering the humiliation that she cried for two days. On the third day, she went out quietly through a window in the dead of the night and leapt into a bottomless ravine."

"Ah!" cried Shi Qing and Min Rou again.

"Has ... has she been rescued?" asked Shi Qing in a trembling voice.

"You know how deep the ravines outside Lingxiao City are," answered Geng Wanzhong. "A stone that falls into any of these ravines will become dust, what more a human being. Would such a lovely and tender little girl not become meat-sauce if she jumped in as well?"

Ke Wanjun, a Snow Mountain disciple who was about 27 or 28 years old, added indignantly: "Well, the most unjust consequence of this mess has fallen on our Eldest Brother-at-arms. He had his right arm chopped off by our teacher for no reason at all!"

Shi Qing was shocked: "The Dragon of Wind and Fire?"

"Who else?" asked Ke Wanjun in return. "Our teacher deeply regretted the loss of his grand-daughter, yet he was not able to capture your son. So he threw a great tantrum in the main hall and reprimanded Brother Feng for being lenient with his students. He also blamed him for being a horseshit teacher who only knows how to eat. As the scolding increased, our teacher became angrier. Suddenly, he drew Brother Feng's sword from its scabbard and chopped his arm off. Then, our teacher's wife spoke up, saying that our teacher should not be so irritable until he had to vent his anger on someone else. Subsequently, the elderly couple got into an argument right in front of all the disciples. Things became so bad that our teacher ended up slapping his wife. Our teacher's wife left in a fit of anger and vowed never to step into Lingxiao City again."

Shi Qing felt terribly ashamed: I ordered my only son to study under the tutelage of Feng Wanli because I admire his martial arts skills, but little did I know that it would turn him into a disabled man. Feng Wanli's swordplay techniques are powerful and swift like the violent gale and the raging fire; that is why he is nicknamed the 'Dragon of Wind and Fire'. He has many enemies; now that he has lost his pugilistic abilities, I am afraid that he will not dare to take a single step away from the Great Snow Mountain for the rest of his life. Sigh, I have really done a disservice to a good friend.

Then, he heard Wang Wanren say: "Younger Brother Ke, you feel that our Eldest Brother has suffered an injustice. Has our Brother Bai not suffered an injustice as well? Not only has his daughter been harmed, his wife has gone mad."

As Shi Qing and Min Rou listened, they became so startled that they found themselves wishing for a hole in which they could hide. They really did not know that their son's misbehaviour in Lingxiao City had resulted in so many tragic consequences.

Turning a blind eye to the feelings of shame, Shi Qing asked: "Why ... why does Mrs Bai not have the peace of mind?"

"What else could the reason be, except for the work of your precious son?" said Wang Wanren. "After our little niece died, Brother Bai blamed his wife for not taking good care of their daughter and thus allowing her to run away through a window. Sister-in-Law Bai was already filled with remorse, so after

hearing her husband's words, she could not stop wailing: 'A'Xiu, your mother is the one who caused your death! A'Xiu, your mother is the one who caused your death!' Her mind became muddled and confused after that. Now, two sisters-at-arms have to keep watch her around the clock, for fear that she too would jump into the ravine. Manor-Master Shi, should my Brother Bai then not go and burn your Xuansu Manor down?"

"He should, he should!" answered Shi Qing. "My wife and I are terribly ashamed. Even if we have to travel to the ends of the earth, we will capture that unfilial boy and send him to Lingxiao City, so that he can be slowly dismembered to his death in memory of Miss Bai...."

Min Rou gasped in shock and fainted into her husband's arms.

Shi Qing responded by stimulating her philtrum(4), but it took quite a while before she regained consciousness.

Wang Wanren went on: "Manor-Master Shi, I am afraid that there are two more lives belonging to our Snow Mountain School that must also be added to the account of Xuansu Manor."

"Two more?" asked Shi Qing in surprise. He had weathered many a violent storm in his life, but none of them had been as cruel as the one that he was currently faced with. When his second son, Zhongjian, was killed by his enemies years ago, he was extremely sad and angry. Yet, the experience was nothing like the shame and fear that he had in his heart now. He wanted to speak, but no words came out.

"After this incident, our teacher sent eighteen disciples out under the leadership of Brother Bai," said Wang Wanren. "Their destination is Jiangnan; their purpose is to burn your manor down. In addition ... in addition" At this point, he began to stammer, as if he was hesitant to go on. Meanwhile, Geng Wanzhong kept giving him warning glances, as if to prevent him from continuing.

By then, colour had drained from Shi Qing's face, for he had guessed what Wang Wanren had wanted to say. "They are to capture my wife and me," he said, "and take us the Great Snow Mountain, so that we can pay for Miss Bai's death with our lives."

"That is an overstatement," said Geng Wanzhong immediately. "We are not

audacious people. Even if we were bold enough to do it, how can we move you to visit us with the superficial pugilistic skills that we have? My teacher says: 'Your son must be found no matter what. Although he is young, he is actually very sharp, for how could he have disappeared without a trace, given the dangerous topography of Lingxiao City and the many pursuers on his tail?'"

"Yu'er must be dead," said Min Rou as tears streamed down her face. "He must have fallen into a ravine too."

Geng Wanzhong shook his head. "No," he said. "His footsteps led towards the foot of the mountain. Later, we found the marks of a sled as well. Well, I am embarrassed to say that we, as a large party of adults, have been unable to capture a fifteen-year-old boy. My teacher did indeed issue you with an invitation to Lingxiao City, so that both parties can discuss a fitting solution to this incident."

"You put in many ways," Shi Qing responded in a calm voice, "but you still want us to pay for Miss Bai's death with our lives. Brother Wang says that there are two more lives; what is that actually about?"

"The eighteen disciples that I mentioned earlier went about their tasks in two groups," answered Wang Wanren. "The first group, comprising of nine people, headed to Jiangnan. The other group, led by Brother Geng, looked for your son all over the Central Regions and met with some misfortune. Trouble never comes alone...."

"Younger Brother Wang, you do not have to continue," said Geng Wanzhong at once. "The matter is not related to Manor-Master Shi."

"Why not?" asked Wang Wanren. "If not for that boy, how could Elder Brother Sun and Younger Brother Zhu have died dubious deaths? Furthermore, we do not know who the enemy really is. How are you going to report the matter to our teacher when we get home? If our teacher becomes angered, I am afraid that you may lose an arm too. Manor-Master Shi and his wife have friends in many places, so what is wrong with asking them for some help?"

Recalling his Brother Feng's tragic dismemberment, Geng Wanzhong realised that he really did not have any explanation for the deaths of Sun and Zhu. Hence, it was not a bad idea to ask Shi Qing and his wife for help. So he said to his

brother-at-arms: "All right, speak if you wish."

"Manor-Master Shi," Wang Wanren began, "three days ago, we heard that a man with the surname of Wu had obtained the Black Steel Symbol and gone into hiding by pretending to be a fried-cake seller in Hou Jian Ji outside the city of Bianliang. After a quiet discussion, my brothers and I felt that it is a matter of luck when it comes to capturing Shi Zhongyu. After all, where are we going to start looking for him, given that the immense population of the Central Regions? If we cannot find him in ten years, I am afraid we would not be able to return to Lingxiao City for ten years as well. On the other hand, if we get the Black Steel Symbol, we would be able to go back to our teacher with a suitable replacement for our failure to capture your son. During our discussion, someone cursed your son, saying that he deserved death for being so audacious at such a young age. Suddenly, we heard a loud laugh in an aged voice: 'Wonderful, wonderful! What a rare boy! Such talent and character is unrivalled in his time!'"

Shi Qing and Min Rou exchanged a glance. It was more difficult hearing someone praise their son in this manner than having them scold and curse him.

Wang Wanren went on: "At that time, we were talking in a guest-house. The four walls of the room were made of bricks, but the voice penetrated the walls and sounded so clear, as if the speaker was in front of us. The nine of us spoke softly, so we did not know how he heard us."

Shi Qing and Min Rou became alert at once: There is nothing strange about hearing someone's words through a brick wall. The wall could have a hole or crack in it, or the listener could be hidden below a window in the wall. The speaker inside the room could also be shouting without realising it. But for someone to speak through a wall and be heard in an extremely clear manner, his internal strength must be very rich. So, these people from the Snow Mountain School met a highly-skilled pugilist. This is indeed having one trouble follow another.

Ke Wanjun said, "We were stunned after hearing the voice. Brother Wang called out: 'Who is he that is so impatient with life, to eavesdrop on our conversation?' The man did not respond. However, a short while later, we heard the old scoundrel say: 'A'Dang, how many people have we killed today?' A female imp answered: 'Only one.' The scoundrel said: 'Then, we can kill two more.'"

"Ah! 'Not More Than Three a Day!'" said Shi Qing.

Geng Wanzhong, who had been silent for quite a while, responded at once: "Manor-Master Shi, do you know the old scoundrel?"

Shi Qing shook his head. "No, I do not know him," he replied. "However, my late father mentioned that there is such a man in the martial arts circle. His nickname is 'Not More Than Three a Day', for he allowed himself to kill only three people at the most. After the third killing, his heart would soften, so he could not take a fourth life."

"Damn! Is it not enough to kill three people a day?" said Wang Wanren in anger. "This evil, sinister and crafty person has actually been allowed to live until this day!"

Shi Qing did not respond. Instead, he thought: I have heard that this Senior Ding tends to tread the fine line between the upright and the unorthodox. Although he is a cruel man who enjoys killing people, I have not heard of him committing any great and evil crimes. Most of his victims seemed to have deserved their punishments as well. Shi Qing knew that the Snow Mountain School would be offended by this information, so he did not share it.

"What is the name of the scoundrel?" asked Geng Wanzhong. "Which clan or school is he from?"

"As for as I know, the man's surname is Ding," answered Shi Qing, "but I do not know what his given name is. Since he is nicknamed 'Not More Than Three a Day', most of the older generation know him as Ding 'Not Three' Ding Busan."

"Well, he is indeed neither three nor four (busan-busi), a shady character who makes frivolous remarks!" said Ke Wanjun in an indignant voice.

"There are three of them altogether," Shi Qing continued. "His older brother is called Ding 'Not Two' Ding Bu'er, while his younger one is known as Ding 'Not Four' Ding Busi."

"What rubbish!" roared Wang Wanren. "Neither two nor three, and neither three nor four! There are actually people with such horseshit for names!"

Geng Wanzhong spoke up: "Brother Wang, do not use vulgarities in front of Sister-in-Law Shi."

"Yes," Wang Wanren replied, before turning to Min Rou and adding, "I am sorry."

Min Rou smiled and said, "I think those are just nicknames. No one would give themselves such strange monikers, would they?"

"Well, the three Ding brothers have quite a reputation in the martial arts circle," said Shi Qing to the Snow Mountain disciples. "It is likely that Old Master Bai has a conflict with them; hence, he is unwilling to mention their names. Consequently, you have not heard of them. What happened after that?"

"The scoundrel uttered more nonsense!" answered Wang Wanren. "He said: 'Is there someone called Sun Wannian? And also someone named Zhu Wanchun? Come out, both of you!' By then, we had reached the ends of our tethers, so the nine of us went out together, only to find the courtyard empty. There was no one there, so we started looking for him. I went up to the roof, but I did not see anyone at all. Then, Younger Brother Ke went into the room next to ours for a look. The door had been ajar. There was only a lighted candle in the room and nothing else. We felt that the whole affair was very strange."

"Suddenly, we heard the scoundrel's voice coming from our room! He said: 'Sun Wannian, Zhu Wanchun, why did both of you stare at my grand-daughter on the road to Jingzhou? Why did you pass frivolous comments and exchange lecherous looks? My grand-daughter may be young, but she is quite pretty. You beasts! You must have been entertaining dirty ideas in your hearts! So I am not accusing you unjustly, am I? Come in here at once!' Brother Sun and Brother Zhu became so angry that they rushed into the room with their swords. Brother Geng said: 'Be careful! Let us attack together!' Just then, the light in the room went out. Everything fell silent. I shouted: 'Brother Sun, Brother Zhu!', but they did not respond. There were no sounds of clashing weapons in the room either. A chill entered our hearts. We quickly shook a fire-booklet(5) alight, and saw our two brothers kneeling on the floor with their swords by their sides."

"Brother Geng and I rushed forward. When we tried to pull Brother Sun and Brother Zhu to their feet, they collapsed. They were dead, but there were no injuries or other marks on their bodies. We do not know what strange methods the old scoundrel used to murder them. Much to our embarrassment, we have not seen the scoundrel or his impish grand-daughter since."

Ke Wanjun chipped in: "Well, we did not notice the two on the road to Jingzhou. Even if Brother Sun and Brother Zhu had actually looked at his granddaughter, it should not have been such a big issue."

Shi Qing and Min Rou nodded.

For a moment, no one spoke.

Then, Shi Qing said, "Brother Geng, when did that niezhang(6) cause so much trouble in Lingxiao City?"

"On the tenth day of the twelfth month," answered Geng Wanzhong.

Shi Qing nodded. "Today is the twelfth day of the third month," he said. "Three months have passed since Brother Bai left Lingxiao City, so he must have burnt Xuansu Manor down a long time ago. Brother Geng, Brother Wang, firstly, my wife and I will have to track that niezhang down. Once he is captured, we will have him tied up and sent to Lingxiao City, so that our apologies may be offered to Old Master Bai, Brother Feng and Brother Bai. Secondly, we want to investigate the movements of 'Not More Than Three A Day' Ding Busan. Since my wife and I are unable to move him to visit your school, we will supply Old Master Bai with the information he needs to personally put an end to this matter. We take our leave!" He raised his clasped fists and bowed.

"Is ... is that all?" asked Ke Wanjun. "Are you leaving us with just a few sentences?"

"Brother Ke, do you have something to say?" asked Shi Qing in return.

"Since we cannot find your son, we have no alternatives but to invite you and your wife to Lingxiao City," answered Ke Wanjun. "You can see our teacher and present him with a suitable explanation for the matter."

"We will naturally have to visit Lingxiao City," said Shi Qing, "but there must first be signs of positive outcomes for the issues at hand."

Ke Wanjun looked at Geng Wanzhong. Then, he looked at Wang Wanren. Finally, he said in a huff, "If our teacher knows that we have met you but failed to invite you for a visit ... then ... then ..."

Shi Qing understood his intent. Ke Wanjun was thinking of seizing victory by

sheer numbers and taking the couple to the Great Snow Mountain by force. Since they could not capture the son, the parents would do as well. Hence, Shi Qing said, "Old Master Bai enjoys high prestige and commands universal respect as the pillar of strength in the Western Frontiers, and I have always honoured him as if he was my own teacher. If Brother Bai were here on his father's orders and wanted us to visit Lingxiao City, we would naturally obey him. But now ... mmm, let us do it this way!"

Removing the black scabbard and sword from his waist, he turned to Min Rou and said, "Remove your sword as well."

His wife did as she was told.

Shi Qing took the pair of swords in his hands and presented them horizontally to Geng Wanzhong. "Brother Geng," he said, "please hold our weapons in your custody."

Geng Wanzhong knew that the razor-sharp Twin Swords of Black and White were among the rarest blades in the martial arts circle. Shi Qing and Min Rou loved them as dearly as their own lives, so the act of handing the swords over meant that they were honouring the Snow Mountain School. Consequently, the couple would have to visit Lingxiao City to retrieve their blades.

Geng Wanzhong wanted to say a few modest words, but Ke Wanjun spoke first: "My niece's life, Brother Feng's arm, my teacher's wife's departure, Sister-in-Law Bai's madness, as well as Brother Sun and Brother Zhu's meaningless deaths ... can these two metal swords really make up for them all? Brother Geng may have a friendship with you, but I, Ke, do not know you at all! Shi, you must go to Lingxiao City today regardless of whether you want to or not!"

Shi Qing smiled. "My son has offended your school deeply," he said. "Yet, there is nothing I can say beyond words of apology and guilt. Brother Ke, you are an up-and-coming Snow Mountain disciple with strong martial arts skills. Although I have yet to make your acquaintance, I have long admired you." As he spoke, he continued holding the pair of swords in his hands and waited for Geng Wanzhong to receive them.

Ke Wanjun thought: An intense fight is unavoidable if we want to take these two people back to the Great Snow Mountain with us. But it is good that the

man has voluntarily presented us with their weapons, a true example of the saying, 'He who sins should not live'. Concerned that Shi Qing might suddenly renege on his word and take back the swords, Ke Wanjun took two steps forward, put his hands out and grabbed the swords tightly with the seizing techniques of the Snow Mountain School. "In that case, give us your weapons," he said.

As he retracted his arms, he suddenly felt a very strong suction coming from Shi Qing's palms that caused the swords to remain tenaciously stuck to them. As a result, Ke Wanjun could not take them away. Shocked, he tugged forcefully at the weapons with the strength of his arms and a shout: "Rise!"

At that moment, the suction in Shi Qing's palms vanished. A loud crack was heard, followed by a cry of pain: "A-yo!" Ke Wanjun's wrists were both dislocated. Apparently, he had exerted a force of several hundred jin (1 jin is about 500g) on the swords when he tried to take them. With the suction gone, the entire weight of the force acted on his own wrists and dislocated them.

Ke Wanjun's fingers loosened and the swords fell back into Shi Qing's hands.

All the onlookers could clearly see that Shi Qing's palms had been open during the brief episode. None of his fingers had moved. So it was entirely Ke Wanjun's fault for exerting his strength in an erroneous way that resulted in having his wrists broken by several hundred jin of force.

Both hurt and angered, Ke Wanjun lifted his right leg and sent a forceful kick towards Shi Qing's abdomen.

"Do not be rude!" shouted Geng Wanzhong at once, pulling his brother away by the back of his shirt and causing the kick to miss its target. He knew the extent of Shi Qing's internal strength. If the kick had struck him, Ke Wanjun's right leg would certainly have broken.

Since Geng Wanzhong's knowledge of martial arts was significantly higher, he took a breath and directed his energy to each of his ten fingers before reaching slowly for the swords. As soon as the tips of his fingers touched the weapons, his body shook, as if he had just had an electrical shock. A burst of heat filled his chest, indicating that Shi Qing had channelled his energy through the swords to himself. Oh no! thought Geng Wanzhong in dismay. Shi Qing has prepared this

trap to draw me into a duel of internal strength.

Duels of internal strength between martial arts practitioners were known to be the most dangerous of combat undertakings. With no room for manoeuvring, the strong would survive but the weak would often die. If the internal strength of one party did not differ much from that of the other, the pair would often carry the fight on until one or both of them died. On occasions where one or both parties wanted to stop the duel or give in to the opponent after a while, he/they would also be unable to do so.

Thus hindered by the circumstances, Geng Wanzhong had no alternatives but to exercise his internal strength in defence. Hence, he did not expect the force of his own energy to rebound as soon as it hit that of his opponent.

Shi Qing turned his palms over lightly and placed the swords into Geng Wanzhong's hands. "We are brothers, so how can we ruin the relationship between us?" he said with a smile. "We take our leave!"

By then, Geng Wanzhong had broken into cold sweat, for his internal strength was really far beneath Shi Qing's: How could I be his match when the force of my energy rebounded as soon as it met his? Besides, he was already being very merciful by preventing me from injury and shame. Thus, Geng Wanzhong stood dumbfounded and embarrassed with the twin swords in his hands.

"We had better go to Bianliang City," said Shi Qing to his wife.

Min Rou's eyes turned red again. "Our child ...," she began, only to have her husband shake his head and reply, "I would rather he suffer the same fate as Jian'er and be killed by someone's sabre. That would be a quick solution."

Tears rolled down Min Rou's cheeks: "You ... you ..."

Taking her by the hand, Shi Qing led Min Rou to the white horse and helped her onto the saddle. As the disciples of the Snow Mountain School watched the scene, they could hardly believe that this fragile-looking woman was the impressive 'Sword of Moral Integrity' that shook the realm of the rivers and lakes.

As the Twin Swords of Black and White rode away, Hua Wanzi returned. By then, Wang Wanren had already set Ke Wanjun's dislocated wrists, but the latter

was still cursing his opponent at the top of his voice. After ascertaining the cause of her brother's condition, she frowned and said, "Brother Geng, I am afraid this matter is not right."

"Why?" asked Geng Wanzhong. "Our opponents are so highly skilled in martial arts that all seven of us would not have detained them even if we worked together. Now that we have their weapons, we will be able to explain ourselves when we return to Lingxiao City." As he spoke, he unsheathed the swords. The White Sword was as cold as ice, while the Black Sword was as dark as ink. The weapons exuded such a spine-chilling air that Geng Wanzhong's muscles began to ache involuntarily, testifying that these were indeed rare and treasured blades. "Well, the swords are certainly real!" he said.

"Of course they are!" answered Hua Wanzi. "Since we are unable to detain the owners of these swords, do you think we have the ability to keep these blades?"

Alerted, Geng Wanzhong responded with a question of his own: "What do you think, Sister Hua?"

"Last year, while I was chatting with Sister-in-Law Bai about valuable swords and sabres, the little scoundrel Shi Zhongyu interrupted us and bragged about his parents' swords," replied Hua Wanzi. "He said that the Twin Swords of Black and White ranked as two of the sharpest blades under the sun. He also said that his parents were more willing to part with him and send him to the Snow Mountain School than to part with the swords. Apparently, they did not seem bothered about leaving their son for several years, but could not be separated from their swords for even a day. Although Manor-Master Shi has given us the swords, he might take them back in a few days with a devious scheme. How then would we handle him when he shows up in Lingxiao City later and asks for the weapons to be returned?"

"The seven of us will just have to keep our eyes on the swords," said Ke Wanjun. "After all, the swords cannot grow wings and fly away."

As for Geng Wanzhong, he muttered to himself for a while before speaking up: "Sister Hua's words are not mere statements of over-anxiety. Shi Qing is not an ordinary man, so we must exercise extra caution so that we do not stumble again."

"It is always right to be careful," said Wang Wanren. "From this day forth, six of us men will take turns guarding this pair of cursed swords each night." After a pause, he added, "Brother Geng, Shi is now in Bianliang. Should we go there too?"

Geng Wanzhong thought: If I say that we should not go to Bianliang, I may give the impression of fearing the enemy. Furthermore, it will be very embarrassing in the future to say that I have passed by a renowned city of the Central Province without actually visiting it. Yet, it is terribly risky to enter Bianliang with the swords while Shi Qing and his wife are there.

As he muttered indecisively, a burst of loud rebukes was heard. A party of errand-runners for the governing authorities appeared on the main road, followed by four men bearing a large sedan-chair with heavy woollen covers in green. A person of governing authority had arrived.

Geng Wanzhong thought: Bandits have just pillaged and killed in Hou Jian Ji, so the seven of us cannot avoid being suspected of the crime simply by the act of gathering here with our swords. Things will become troublesome when the authorities are involved. Hence, he glanced at his team and said, "Let us go!"

Just as they were walking quickly away, one of the errand-runners called out: "Stop the murderous bandits! The murderous bandits are making their escape!"

Geng Wanzhong ignored the shouts. Waving his hand, he urged his team to hurry on.

Just then, the errand-runner shouted: "The murderer's name is Bai Zizai, the leader of the Snow Mountain School who has grown old enough to die! The weak and dishonest Bai Zizai kills for wealth! How dangerous!"

All seven of the disciples of the Snow Mountain School reacted in surprise and anger, for their teacher, Bai Zizai, was actually known as the 'Gentleman of Impressive Strength and Virtue'. The errand-runner was already very rude to call out Bai Zizai's name in full, yet he carried his audacity a step further and referred to the man as 'weak and dishonest'.

Wang Wanren unsheathed his sword and shouted: "Son of a bitch! Let me cut off his rude tongue first!"

"Wait, Brother Wang," said Geng Wanzhong. "How did the governing authorities come to know about the name and title of our teacher? There must be an instigator behind them." Almost at once, he leapt forward, raised his clasped fists and asked, "Who is the official who has come?"

A soft *zip* was heard before a projectile flew out of the sedan-chair and struck the Fu Tu acupoint on Geng Wanzhong's leg. The projectile was very small but it moved with a tremendous amount of power.

His leg weakened, Geng Wanzhong fell to the ground. Unfazed, he lifted the sword in his hand and threw it forcefully towards the sedan-chair. Although he was no longer standing, this stroke -- called 'The Crane Flies to the Highest Heavens' (He4 Fei1 Jiu3 Tian1) -- was executed with such viciousness and accuracy that the sword ripped straight through the curtain of the sedan-chair. From the looks of things, the person inside -- the one who threw the projectile -- had been stabbed.

As delight filled his heart, Geng Wanzhong noticed that the four sedan-chair bearers were still running swiftly with their load. Then, quite unexpectedly, a horsewhip flew out of the sedan chair and wrapped itself around Wang Wanren's left leg. A pull and a sweep later, Wang Wanren was thrown aside. But the Inky Sword in his hands was gone, taken by the horsewhip.

"Is that Manor-Master Shi?" asked Hua Wanzi in a loud voice. At the same time, she unsheathed the White Sword and sent it towards the horsewhip. Another *zip* was heard as a second hidden weapon came flying out of the sedan-chair and struck Hua Wanzi on the wrist. Reeling in pain, she dropped the White Sword at once.

One of Hua Wanzi's brothers-at-arms quickly went forward to put his foot on the precious weapon. Just then, something flew out of the sedan-chair and covered his head. The sudden loss of sight caused him to leap back hurriedly. Grabbing the object on his head and throwing it to the ground, he soon discovered that it was just an officer's hat. By then, the horsewhip had already wrapped itself around the White Sword and was in the midst of pulling it into the sedan-chair.

With a shout, Ke Wanjun and the others set off in pursuit of the stolen swords.

A volley of *zips* followed as a stream of hidden weapons went forth from the sedan-chair and struck the Snow Mountain disciples on the face and the waist. Although none of these weapons were aimed at vital body parts, they managed to cause an extraordinary degree of pain. When the disciples took a look at the weapons that hit them, they were dumbfounded to see that these were buttons of yellow bronze. Apparently, these buttons had been pulled off some garments just before they were used as weapons.

By then, the disciples of the Snow Mountain School were quite certain that Shi Qing was the occupant of the sedan-chair. Perhaps, even his wife was in there with him. So if they went forward and engaged the couple in a fight, they would simply end up with dust-covered heads and faces.

Ke Wanjun was so angry that he yelled like a child: "The young of the Shi Family is ridiculous and shameless, while the old are shameless and ridiculous! They say that they would leave their weapons behind, only to appear a moment later and snatch them away!"

As for Wang Wanren, he pointed a finger at the fast-disappearing sedan-chair and cursed its occupants at the top of his voice: "Scoundrels! Bastards!" He even jumped up and down on both feet.

Finally, Geng Wanzhong said, "If word of this matter gets out, it will bring no good to the reputation of the Snow Mountain School. We had better keep our mouths shut for now, until we get home and report the matter to our teacher." Looking back, he felt that their trip had been fraught with nothing but trouble. He had always had an air of arrogance back in Lingxiao City, for he had considered the pugilistic techniques of the Snow Mountain School to be absolutely peerless. Yet, his hands and legs were tied when these very techniques were used in actual combat. Hence, he could not help but sigh deeply as dejection filled his heart.

Definitions and/or words left (mostly) in their original form:

1. *Jianghu* = literally, "realm of the rivers and lakes".
2. *Xuansu Manor* = literally, Manor of "The Black and the White".

3. *Lingxiao City = literally, City of "Reaching Up to Heaven".*
4. *Philtrum = the vertical groove on the median line of the upper lip.*
5. *Fire-booklet (huo3 zhe2) = a portable instrument that produces a small flame when shaken.*
6. *Niezhang (nie4 zhang4) = in this context, an offensive label for children that considers them as mediums of retribution for their parents' sins; also known as 'ye4 zhang4'.*

Chapter 3 - The Skyscraping Cliff

By and by, Xie Yanke saw three jujube (zao3, or Chinese date) trees along the road that were laden with big red fruit. "The jujubes here are very good," he said, pointing to them.

"Big Good Man, you want to eat some jujubes, do you not?" asked the little beggar.

"What 'Big Good Man'?" asked a surprised Xie Yanke in return.

The sedan-chair travelled for several li (1 li = 500 metres) before turning into a small road. The horse-whip would swing out at the slightest deceleration in the footsteps of the forward sedan-chair bearers and strike them heavily across their backs. Hence, these men did not dare to slow down at all, forcing their counterparts at the back of the sedan-chair to keep up with their frenetic pace. Behind them, came the errand-runners.

After speeding along for another four to five li (2.0-2.5 km), the occupant of the sedan-chair said, "All right, stop."

The four sedan-chair bearers reacted as if they had received a great amnesty, setting the chair down on the ground between gasps of air.

The curtain parted and an old man stepped out, his left hand pulling a little beggar boy behind him. He was none other than the Master of the Black Steel Symbol, Xie Yanke.

Turning to the errand-runners, he roared: "Go back and tell your damned officer that today's happenings must not be made public. As soon as I hear a single word about it, I will have your heads plucked off and your officer's stamp of authority thrown into the Yellow River."

"Yes, yes," answered the errand-runners, bowing repeatedly. "We will certainly not speak a single word. Old Master, please take your time as you leave!"

"Take my time as I leave?" asked Xie Yanke. "Are you thinking of getting some soldiers to arrest me?"

"No, no," replied an errand-runner. "We would not dare to. Absolutely not."

"Do you remember all the things that I told you to say to your damned officer?" asked Xie Yanke again.

"Yes, I do," answered the errand-runner. "I will say: My colleagues and I saw with our own eyes that the old man who sold fried cakes in Hou Jian Ji, as well as the worker of the sundry store, were all killed by an old fellow named Bai Zizai, the leader of the Snow Mountain School. Although he is nicknamed the 'Gentleman of Impressive Strength and Virtue', he is in reality weak and dishonest. The murder weapon is a blood-stained sabre. Since we have both eye-witnesses and material evidence, the old man should not have any excuses for the crime."

Apparently, the errand-runner had been beaten so badly by Xie Yanke that he had become afraid. Thus, in order to get into the latter's good books, he made up the part about eye-witnesses and material evidence. As for the sabre, it was a simply rouse that was often used by the local authorities to blame someone for a crime.

Xie Yanke laughed. "This Old Bai uses a sword," he said, "not a sabre."

"Yes, yes," said the errand-runner. "The murderous Bai had a sword of dark steel, which he used to stab the body of the old fried-cake seller. Everyone in Hou Jian Ji saw it as clearly as daylight."

Xie Yanke was amused: If the Gentleman of Impressive Strength and Virtue Bai Zizai really wanted to kill Wu Daotong, would he really have needed a weapon? Hence, he paid no further attention to the errand-runner. Taking the little beggar's hand in his left hand, and holding the Twin Swords of Black and White in his right, he strode away in satisfaction and delight.

Earlier, after taking the little beggar away, Xie Yanke had become suspicious about Shi Qing and his wife, as well as the disciples of the Snow Mountain School. He was concerned that these people might hatch a plot against himself, so he struck the little beggar's acupoints and threw the immobilised boy into a clump of grass. Then, he returned to the scene of conflict, hid behind a tree and eavesdropped on the conversations of Shi and the others. Since his martial arts skills were far beyond those of Shi and the others, no one -- not even renowned

pugilists like Shi Qing and Min Rou -- noticed his presence. After listening to all the details, he realised that the matter had absolutely nothing to do with himself. However, when he saw Shi Qing giving the Twin Swords to Geng Wanzhong, he decided to snatch them away. He returned to the little beggar in the clump of grass and unblocked his acupoints. Just then, the county magistrate passed by on a sedan-chair. The magistrate was on his way to Hou Jian Ji to investigate the killings that had taken place. Xie Yanke pulled the magistrate out of the sedan-chair before forcing the errand-runners and sedan-chair bearers to take the little beggar and himself on the mission to seize the Twin Swords. Thus, it was only natural for Geng Wanzhong and the others to believe that Shi Qing and his wife were the culprits because they could not see Xie Yanke at all.

Xie Yanke took the little beggar by the hand and headed for a more secluded area of the countryside. Arriving at a stream and finding no one there, Xie Yanke released the little beggar's hand. Then, he unsheathed Min Rou's White Sword and held its blade against the boy's neck. "Whose instigation are you acting on?" he asked in a stern voice. "If you speak even half of an untruth, I will have you killed immediately." As he spoke, he waved the White Sword and cut a small tree nearby into two. The upper part of the tree fell into the river -- branches, leaves and all -- and followed the current downstream.

"I ... I ...," stammered the little beggar. "What ... instigation ... I"

Xie Yanke took out the Black Steel Symbol and roared: "Who gave you this?"

"I ... I ... ate it out ... out of a fried cake," answered the little beggar.

Furious, Xie Yanke turned his left hand over and brought it swiftly towards the boy's cheek. Just before the back of his hand touched the boy, he suddenly remembered the deadly oath that he had sworn years ago: He could not use the strength of even a single finger to harm anyone who put the Black Steel Symbol into his hands. Thus, he forced himself to restrain his hand and roared: "Rubbish! What fried cake? I am asking you: Who gave you this piece of metal?"

"I picked a fried cake off the ground, took a bite and nearly ... nearly broke my tooth ...," said the little beggar.

Xie Yanke thought: Could that scoundrel Wu Daotong have hidden the Symbol in the fried cake? Then, he had another thought: How could such a coincidence

exist under the sun? That scoundrel valued the Symbol more than his life, so how could he be willing to put it into a fried cake?

He did not know that the situation then was simply too urgent. With the riders of the Golden Sabre Stockade closing in on Hou Jian Ji from all directions, Wu Daotong had no opportunity to find a suitable hiding place for the Black Steel Symbol. Hence, he had taken the great risk of putting the Symbol into a fried cake and handing the cake to the leader of the Golden Sabre Stockade. The latter had erupted in rage and thrown the cake into a ditch. Consequently, the men of the stockade turned the cake shop upside-down, without even thinking of looking inside the cakes that were scattered on the ground around them.

Xie Yanke looked at the little beggar and asked, "What is your name?"

"I ... I ... am called Gouzazhong," answered the boy.

"What?" asked Xie Yanke in surprise. "Gouzazhong?"

"Yes," the boy replied. "My mother calls me Gouzazhong."

Xie Yanke was a man who hardly laughed, doing so only a few times a year. Yet, the little beggar's answers tickled him so much that he could not help but hold his stomach and laughed out loud. He thought: It is common for people to give their children humble and lowly names in the hope that these children would be protected from jealous evil spirits and grow up big and tall. So it is no surprise to hear names like A'Gou (Dog), A'Niu (Cow), Zhushi (Pig Excrement) and Choumao (Smelly Cat), but who would actually name their son Gouzazhong (Bastard)? It is even stranger that the name was given by his mother.

Xie Yanke's laughter caused the little beggar to giggle and smile.

By and by, Xie Yanke reined in his laughter and asked, "What is your father's name?"

"My father?" asked the boy in return with a shake of his head. "I ...I do not have a father."

"Who else is there in your family?" asked Xie Yanke again.

"Me, my mother and A'Huang," answered the boy.

"Who is A'Huang?" asked Xie Yanke.

"A'Huang is a yellow dog," said the boy. "My mother is missing. I came out to look for her and A'Huang followed. After a while, it became hungry and went to look for something to eat. Then, it went missing too. I looked here and there, but I cannot find it."

At this, Xie Yanke thought: So he is a retarded boy. He must have obtained the Black Steel Symbol absolutely by chance. I will ask him to beg me for a small favour. Once I fulfil the oath that I made years ago, the matter will be settled. Hence, he began: "You can beg me..."

Then, he stopped and thought: If this retarded boy wants me to help him find his mother or even that dog A'Huang, where am I going to start looking? His mother must have run away with a man. A'Huang has probably been killed and eaten by someone. I had better not take on such difficult problems, for it is much easier for me to kill eight or ten highly-skilled pugilists than to find his A'Huang.

He muttered to himself for a while and soon came up with a plan. "All right," he said. "Let me tell you something. You must not convey any messages to me regardless of the person who asks you to do so, or I will chop your head off immediately. Do you know that?" The fact that the little beggar had returned the Black Steel Symbol to its owner would be known all over the martial arts circle within a short period of time, so Xie Yanke was concerned that someone would deceive the boy into making a request of him. He would not be able to decline the request because of the oath that he had made.

"Yes," said the little beggar with a nod.

Unsatisfied, Xie Yanke asked, "Do you remember what I said?"

"You said that I must not open my mouth if someone asks me to convey a message to you," answered the boy. "If I say a word, you will chop my head off."

"That is right," said Xie Yanke. "So the silly boy is not a moron after all. Your memory is good. If you were really retarded, things would be difficult. Come with me."

He led the little beggar away from the secluded area and back on to the main road. Soon, they came upon a small shop selling flour-based foods.

Xie Yanke picked two mantou(1) and began to eat. Throwing sideways glances

at the little beggar, he chewed one of the mantou slowly and lavished it with praise: "This is really delicious. It tastes wonderful!" At the same time, he waved the other mantou in front the little beggar: He is used to begging for food, so would he not drool greedily when he sees me eating the 'mantou'? As soon as he opens his mouth and begs me for a bite, I will give him the 'mantou' and fulfil the promise of the Black Steel Symbol. Henceforth, I will be free and unfettered, for this matter will never weigh on my mind again. Although it seemed rather farcical to close the great issue of the Black Steel Symbol with a mere mantou, Xie Yanke felt that dealing with the little beggar was essentially a matter of a fried cake and a steamed bun.

Hence, little did he expect the boy to stare at the mantou and drool, without begging for a bite at all.

Xie Yanke soon grew tired of waiting. He had already finished one mantou and the other was by his mouth, ready to be bitten into. Just as he was about to reach into the steamer for a third bun, the little beggar suddenly said to the shopkeeper: "I want to eat two mantou too." He stretched his hand out towards the steamer and helped himself.

The shopkeeper looked at Xie Yanke to see if the latter agreed. Xie Yanke nodded in delight: When the shopkeeper wants you to pay up, I will see if you are going to beg me or not!

The little beggar ate one mantou after another. When he had eaten four of them, he said, "I am full. I am not eating anymore."

Xie Yanke did not eat more mantou after finishing the two that he had taken, so he said to the shopkeeper: "How much?"

"Two wen (2 copper-cash; approximately 0.02 liang or 1 gram of silver) each," answered the shopkeeper. "Six mantou makes twelve wen (12 copper-cash; approximately 0.12 liang or 6 grams of silver) altogether."

"No," said Xie Yanke. "Each will pay for what he eats. I have eaten two mantou, so I will give you four wen (4 copper-cash; approximately 0.04 liang or 2 grams of silver)." He put his hand into his shirt and began rummaging for the copper-cash required.

To his dismay, there was nothing there! As it turned out, he had used up all his

silver and copper-cash drinking in Bianliang City. Furthermore, he had forgotten to exchange the gold-leaf that he had for smaller pieces of silver while he was there. Now, there was no way that the keeper of this tiny way-side shop would give him change for the gold-leaf.

As Xie Yanke was struggled in embarrassment, the little beggar suddenly brought out a piece of silver. Handing it to the shopkeeper, he said, "Twelve wen altogether! I will pay for it all."

"What?" asked Xie Yanke in surprise. "Do I need you to give me a treat?"

"Well, you have no money," answered the boy with a laugh, "but I do. What is the big deal about treating you to a few mantou?"

The shopkeeper was very amazed too, as he brought out a few small pieces of silver and several strings of copper-cash as change.

The little beggar put the money into his shirt and looked at Xie Yanke, waiting for his instructions.

Xie Yanke could not help but laugh bitterly to himself: I am an upright and incorruptible man by nature. I have never been willing to receive the favour of another when it comes to food and drink. Yet, I have ended up being treated to 'mantou' by a little beggar. Hence, he asked: "How did you know that I did not have any money?"

The little beggar smiled and replied: "I have been in the city for a few days. Every time I see someone putting his hand into his pocket to take some money and rummaging around with a strange expression on his face, it means that he has no money. The people in the shops say that all those who want to eat for free act like this."

Xie Yanke laughed bitterly again: You actually regard me as a man who eats for free. Then, he asked, "Where did you steal the silver from?"

"What 'steal'?" asked the little beggar in return. "That Mrs Lady Guanyin who is dressed in white gave it to me just now."

"Mrs Lady Guanyin who is dressed in white?" asked Xie Yanke. Almost immediately, he realised that the boy was talking about Min Rou. This woman's sentimentalism has spoilt my plans, he thought.

The two continued walking side by side.

After several dozen zhang (1 zhang = 10/3 metres), Xie Yanke raised Min Rou's White Sword and said, "This sword is terribly sharp. One light stroke and the branch of the tree was broken. Do you like it? Beg me, and I will give it to you." He was really unwilling to be entangled with this dirty little fellow any longer, so he hoped that the boy would quickly make a request and put an end to the entire matter.

The little beggar shook his head and said, "I do not want it. The sword belongs to that Mrs Lady Guanyin. She is a good person. I cannot take her things."

Xie Yanke pulled out the Black Sword. With a nonchalant sweep of the sword, he cut right through the trunk of a big tree by the road. "All right," he said, "I will give this Black Sword to you."

The little beggar shook his head again. "It belongs to the gentleman in black clothes," he said. "The gentleman in black clothes and Lady Guanyin are together, so I cannot take his things too."

Xie Yanke spat in disgust. "Gouzazhong," he said, "you have turned out to be quite loyal."

"What is 'quite loyal'?" asked the little beggar, not understanding the old man's words.

Xie Yanke snorted and paid no further attention to him. He thought: Since you do not understand what it is, there is no point in my telling you.

"So you do not like to be quite loyal," said the little beggar. "You ... you are not quite loyal."

Xie Yanke was so furious that his face turned green. Almost at once, he lifted his hand and prepared to bring it down on the top of the little beggar's skull (Tian1 Ling2 Gai4). Then, on seeing the boy's simplicity and innocence, he withdrew his hand: How could I put a finger on him? He really does not understand what loyalty is, so he is not ridiculing me on purpose. Thus, he said, "Why am I not quite loyal? I am certainly quite loyal."

"Is being quite loyal good or bad?" asked the little beggar.

"It is very good," answered Xie Yanke. "Being loyal is naturally a good thing."

"Now I know!" said the little beggar. "Those who do good are good men; those who do bad are bad men. You do good, so you are a Big Good Man."

If these words had been uttered by others, Xie Yanke would have been certain that they were ridiculing him. Hence, he would have lifted his hand and strike them dead without a thought. All his life, no one had ever called him a 'good man'. Although he had done good deeds once in a while, these were mostly carried out because of mere convenience. They were simply too few and trivial compared to the bad things that he had done. Hence, he did not know whether to laugh or to cry upon hearing the sincerity in the little beggar's voice. He thought: This little fellow is silly and incoherent. He says that I am not loyal, but he also says that I am a Big Good Man. If my enemies hear this, would I not become the laughing stock of the martial arts circle? Where will I put my face then? I had better settle this matter as soon as possible, for I cannot go on being entangled in this confusion.

Since the little beggar did not want the Twin Swords of Black and White, Xie Yanke took out a piece of green cloth and had the weapons wrapped. Slinging the bundle across his back, he thought: What should I lead him to beg me for?

As he muttered to himself, he suddenly noticed three heavily-laden jujube (zao3, or Chinese date) trees by the road. Pointing to the big red fruit on the trees, he said, "The jujubes here are very good." He had also seen that the trees were very tall; so long as the little beggar begged him to pluck the fruit, his oath would be fulfilled.

Hence, he did not expect the boy to say, "Big Good Man, you want to eat some jujubes, do you not?"

"What 'Big Good Man'?" asked Xie Yanke in surprise.

"You are a big good man," answered the little beggar, "so I am calling you Big Good Man."

Xie Yanke's face became stern. "Who said that I am a good man?" he asked.

"If you are not a good man, you are a bad man," said the little beggar. "Then, I will call you Big Bad Man."

"I am not a Big Bad Man," said Xie Yanke.

"Now, that is strange," said the little beggar. "You are not a good man, but you are also not a bad man. Ah, that is it! You are not a man!"

"What did you say?" roared Xie Yanke in anger.

"You are very capable," said the little beggar. "Are you a supernatural being?"

"No!" answered Xie Yanke, his tone softening a little. "Sheer nonsense!"

The little beggar shook his head and began talking aloud to himself: "He is not this; he is not that. I do not know what he is."

Suddenly, he ran to the bottom of one of the jujube tree and wrapped his arms around its trunk. Then, he pushed himself up a few times with his feet and began climbing the tree.

Although the boy did not know any martial arts, Xie Yanke could see that he was very agile as he made the ascent. By and by, the little beggar began choosing the largest jujubes, plucking them and stuffing them into his shirt. Within moments, his chest became swollen with fruit.

He slid down the tree and offered the fruit to Xie Yanke with both his hands. "Eat some jujubes!" he said. "You are not a man; you are also not a ghost. Could you be the Bodhisattva? You do not look the part to me."

Xie Yanke ignored him. Eating the sweet and juicy jujubes, he thought: He has not begged me for anything, but I am about to beg him instead. Turning to the boy, he asked, "Do you want to know who I am? All you have to do is to beg me and say: 'Please tell me who you really are. Are you the supernatural Bodhisattva?' I will tell you the answer then."

The little beggar shook his head and said, "I do not beg."

A chill entered Xie Yanke's heart. "Why do you not beg?" he asked at once.

The little beggar replied: "My mother often tells me: 'Gouzazhong, you had better not go and beg of others in your life. If they want to give you something, they will do it without your begging. If they are unwilling, there is no point in begging them. Instead, you will incur their disgust.' Sometimes, when my mother eats something fragrant and sweet and I ask her for a share, she does not give

any to me. Then, she beats me badly and scolds me: 'Gouzazhong, why are you begging me? Why do you not go and beg that little sweet and charming slut instead?' So, I will never beg anyone for anything."

"Who is the 'little sweet and charming slut'?" asked Xie Yanke.

"I do not know," answered the little beggar.

Xie Yanke was both puzzled and disappointed. He thought: If this little fellow really does not beg me for a single thing, how will I ever fulfil the oath I made years ago? His mother is probably a mad old woman, for what other reason is there for her to beat him when he asks for food to eat? As for that 'little sweet and charming slut' whom she curses, it is probably the result of her husband loving the new and loathing the old. Since he has left her, she has been venting her anger and wrath on her son. Foolish rural women are usually like this.

Then, he asked: "You are a little beggar, so do you not beg others for food and money?"

The little beggar shook his head again. "I have never begged before," he answered. "I take whatever people give me. Sometimes, when they do not give, I just take and run when their backs are turned."

"So you are not a little beggar," said Xie Yanke with a wan smile. "You are a little thief!"

"What is a 'little thief'?" asked the boy.

"Do you really not know?" asked Xie Yanke in return. "Or are you acting dumb?"

"Of course, I do not know," answered the little beggar. "That is why I asked. What is 'acting dumb'?"

Xie Yanke looked at the boy. Although his face was stained with dirt, his eyes shone as brightly as black lacquer. There was no foolishness or stupidity in them at all. So he said, "You are not a three-year-old child. Why do you not know anything despite having lived for more than ten years?"

"My mother does not like to talk with me," the little beggar replied. "She says that she feels disgusted when she sees me, so she often ignores me for eight or

ten days. So I talk to A'Huang, who only listens without saying anything. It cannot talk to me about 'little thief' and 'acting dumb'."

Noticing the absolute absence of craftiness in the boy's eyes, Xie Yanke thought: He is not talking in a roundabout way to curse me, is he? Then, he asked, "Do you not go and talk with your neighbours?"

"What are 'neighbours'?" asked the little beggar.

"Those who live near your house are your neighbours," answered Xie Yanke in exasperation.

"Those who live near my house?" repeated the little beggar. "Ah, eleven big pine trees and the squirrels on them, pheasants and hares in the grass -- are these neighbours? All of them can only chirp and squeak, for they cannot talk."

"How is it that you have never talked to anyone except your mother?" asked Xie Yanke.

"I have always lived in the mountains," said the little beggar. "I cannot come down, so besides my mother, there is no one else to talk to. Several days ago, my mother went missing. I tumbled down the mountains when I went to look for her. Then, A'Huang went missing too. I asked people where my mother went, where A'Huang went. They said they did not know. Does that count as talking?"

So you have lived in the barren mountains all your life, thought Xie Yanke. Your mother does not pay attention to you, so you cannot be blamed for not knowing one thing or another. Hence, he said, "That counts as talking too. So how did you know that silver can be used to buy mantou?"

"I have seen people buying," answered the little beggar. "You do not have silver, but I do. You want it, do you not?" He put his hand into his shirt, brought out the small silver pieces and handed them to Xie Yanke.

The old man shook his head. "I do not want them," he said. Then, he thought: This little fellow may be muddle-headed, but he is not stingy. By then, he felt quite relieved, for the conversation had convinced him that the boy was not a ploy planted by an opponent.

The little beggar spoke again: "You said a moment ago that I am not a little beggar, but a little thief. Am I really a little beggar or a little thief?"

Xie Yanke smiled. "You beg others for food and silver," he replied. "When they give to you willingly, you become a little beggar. If you take stealthily without considering whether people are willing to give or not, you are a little thief."

The boy cocked his head and thought about the explanation for a while. Then, he said, "I have never begged anyone for anything. I took food without considering whether people were willing to give or not, so I am a little thief. Yes, you are an old thief."

"What?" roared Xie Yanke in shock and anger. "What did you call me?"

"Are you not an old thief?" asked the little beggar. "It is clear that those people were not willing to give you these two swords, but you snatched them away. You are not a child, so you are naturally an old thief."

This time, Xie Yanke was not upset. Instead, he laughed and said, "'Little Thief' are words used in scolding others; so are 'Old Thief'. You cannot scold me as you wish."

"Why then are you scolding me?" asked the little beggar.

"All right, I will not scold you," said Xie Yanke with a smile. "You are not a little beggar or a little thief. I will call you 'Little Boy' and you can call me 'Elderly Uncle'."

"I am not called 'Little Boy'," said the little beggar with a shake of his head. "I am called Gouzazhong."

"'Gouzazhong' is not a good name," said Xie Yanke. "Your mother can call you by that name, but no one else should. Your mother is really strange. Why does she call her own son 'Gouzazhong'?"

"Why is 'Gouzazhong' bad?" asked the little beggar. "My A'Huang is a 'gou' (dog). I am happy when it accompanies me, just like you are accompanying me right now. When I talk to A'Huang, it can only bark. But you can talk." As he spoke, he placed a hand on Xie Yanke's back and stroked it several times. His movements were gentle and his expression was kind, as if he was stroking the fur on the back of a dog.

Xie Yanke sent a burst of internal energy to his back and gave the little beggar such a shock that the boy felt as if he had just touched a red-hot piece of coal. As

he pulled his hand quickly away, an indescribable feeling of nausea filled his chest and abdomen, so much so that he wanted to throw up several times.

Smiling yet not seemingly so, Xie Yanke looked at the boy and thought: So who asked you to be rude to me? That should be enough for you!

The little beggar stroked his own chest and said, "Elderly Uncle, you are having a fever. You had better go quickly to the tree over there and rest under it for a while. I will go and look for some water so that you can have a drink. Where do you feel unwell? Your fever is very high, so I am afraid your illness is not light." Concern was written all over his face as he spoke. Then, he took the old man by the arm with the intention of helping him into the shade of the tree.

Consequently, the eccentric Xie Yanke found the boy so sincere that he did not use his internal energy to hurt him again. "I am perfectly well," he said. "What illness do I have? Look, has my fever not subsided already?" He took the little beggar's hand and put it on his own forehead.

The little beggar found the old man's forehead so cold that he reacted with even greater anxiety: "Ah, Elderly Uncle, you are about to die soon!"

"Rubbish!" roared Xie Yanke in anger. "Why am I dying soon?"

The little beggar replied: "Once, when my mother fell ill, she felt hot like you did and felt cold again. She cried repeatedly, 'I am dying, dying soon! Heartless One, it is still better for me to die!' And she nearly did, lying in bed more than two months before getting better."

"I will not die," said Xie Yanke with a smile.

The little beggar shook his head, as if he was unconvinced.

The duo walked in a south-easterly direction for a while. Then, suddenly noticing how hot the sun was in the sky, the little beggar went off and plucked seven or eight large leaves from a tree. Xie Yanke thought he was just being playful, so he did not pay him any attention. Hence, he did not expect the boy to present him with a hat that had been fashioned from the leaves.

"The sun is very hot," said the little beggar. "You are ill, so put this hat on."

Xie Yanke did not know whether he should laugh or cry. Since he could not

bear to brush the boy's good intentions aside, he put the tree-leaf hat on his head ... and found it cool and comfortable beneath the scorching sun. He had always had people either fearing or hating him, for no one had ever shown him such kindness and care before. Hence, he could not help but feel a burst of warmth in his heart.

By and by, they arrived at a small town. "You do not have any money," said the little beggar, "so you may have fallen ill because of starvation. Let us go to a restaurant and eat until we are full." He pulled Xie Yanke's hand and entered a restaurant, but since he had never been to one, he did not know how to order food. Therefore, he took out the small silver pieces and copper-cash in his shirt, set them on the table and said to the waiter: "The Elderly Uncle and I want to eat rice, meat and fish. Take this money."

The silver was worth more than three liang (150 grams), sufficient for a table full of banquet-class dishes.

Delighted, the waiter quickly instructed the kitchen to prepare dishes with chicken, meat, fish and duck. Shortly after that, the food was served. Xie Yanke then ordered two jin (1 kg; approximately 1 litre) of baijiu(2).

The little beggar took a mouthful of the drink and spat it out. "How pungent!" he said. "It is not tasty at all."

As the boy turned his attention to the meat and rice, Xie Yanke thought: Although he is quite naïve, he seems to be innately bold and uninhibited. He does not appear to be stupid, so if he is taught carefully, he can become a skilled member of the martial arts circle. Then, he had another thought: Sigh, there are many people who are neither grateful nor faithful in this world. That beast of a disciple of mine is a rare example of natural talent, but has he not harmed me enough? Why am I thinking of taking another disciple?

The thought of his evil disciple made him so angry that he gulped the two jin of baijiu dry, ate some of the food and said, "Let us go!"

"Elderly Uncle, are you feeling better already?" asked the little beggar.

"Yes!" answered Xie Yanke. Then, he thought: Now, all your silver has been spent. If you want to eat again, you will have to beg me. We must find a bigger town and have the gold-leaf changed.

The duo left the small town and headed towards the east.

By and by, Xie Yanke asked, "Little Boy, what is your mother's surname? Did she ever mention it before?"

"My mother is simply 'Mother'," answered the little beggar. "Do mothers have surnames too?"

"Of course," said Xie Yanke. "Everyone has a surname."

"What is my surname then?" asked the little beggar.

"I do not know," answered Xie Yanke. "'Gouzazhong' sounds very unpleasant, so do you want me to give you a surname and name?" If the little beggar said 'Please give me a surname and name', he would have considered to have begged the old man. Thus, Xie Yanke would simply find him a surname and name, and fulfil his oath.

To his surprise, the little beggar said, "It is good if you want to give me a name. But I am afraid my mother will not like it. She is used to calling me 'Gouzazhong'. If I change my name, she will be unhappy. Why is 'Gouzazhong' unpleasant?"

Xie Yanke frowned: It is really not easy to explain the meaning of 'Gouzazhong' and the reason for its unpleasantness in a way that this boy can understand.

Just then, the sounds of weapons clashing were heard coming from the forest towards their left. A chill entered Xie Yanke's heart: Is there a fight over there? The people involved are moving very quickly, so their pugilistic skills are not poor. He turned to the little beggar and said in a low voice: "We will go over there for a look. You must not make any sound." Putting a hand against the boy's arm, Xie Yanke exercised his qinggong abilities and headed towards the clashing sounds.

A few leaps and bounds later, the duo found themselves behind a large tree.

Feeling as if he had just ridden the clouds and mounted the mist, the little beggar nearly laughed out loud in delight. Then, he remembered the Xie Yanke's instructions and quickly clamped a hand over his own mouth.

When the duo looked out from their hiding place, they saw four men leaping up and down in a furious fight. Three of them were attacking the fourth, an unarmed ruddy-faced old man with white hair that came down to his chest. A

sabre lay on the ground some distance away. Its blade was bent, indicating that it had been knocked out of the way by one of the attackers. Xie Yanke recognised the old man as the Benevolent Elder (Dabei Laoren) from the Isle of the White Whale. The latter had lost to him by one stroke years ago, so his martial arts skills were really very good.

Of the three who were attacking him, the first was a tall and skinny man. The second was a sallow-faced Taoist, while the third was a strange-looking fellow with a large cross-shaped scar on his face. The skinny man used a long sword, while the Taoist and the ugly man used a chained hammer (lian4 zi3 chui2) and a sabre with a demon's head on the hilt (gui3 tou2 dao1). Although Xie Yanke did not know any of these men, he could see that they were generally not poor in terms of martial arts abilities. The skinny man was particularly skilled, his sword moving continuously with swift and nimble strokes as well as heavy and powerful ones.

Xie Yanke saw that the Benevolent Elder was already injured. Yet, despite the drops of blood spurting continuously from the wounds on his body, his palms continued to move up and down as if they were in flight. Still bold and powerful, he circled a large tree and dodged towards the east and the west, as he used the tree to fend off the weapons of the three attackers. Then, with seizing techniques in his left hand and either a fist or a palm technique in his right, he led his opponents along until the three weapons collided among themselves.

Xie Yanke could not help but gloat: Old Benevolent has flaunted his superiority in vain. Today, the tiger has fallen upon the open plains and found itself bullied by the dogs. The strong has fallen prey to the weak, so I think it will be difficult for you to escape this time.

The Taoist sent his chained hammer around the tree again and again so as to hit the Benevolent Elder on his side, while the ugly man had such muscular strength that his sabre could cut audibly through the air. Xie Yanke was shocked: I have not set foot in the jianghu for a long time. When did these people appear in the martial arts circle of the Central Region? Why can I not identify their techniques and clan-origins at all? If not for them, the Benevolent Elder would not have been reduced to such a battered state.

Just then, the Taoist spoke in a hoarse voice: "Master of the Isle of the White

Whale, our Clan of Eternal Happiness does not have any conflicts and grudges with you. Our Clan-Master Situ finds you admirable; hence, he has contacted you with good intentions and invited you to join our clan. Why must you speak words of abuse and curse our Clan-Master? All you have to do is accept our invitation, and we will immediately become good brothers and friends. All issues prior to this will no longer be pursued. So why must you put up such a strong resistance and lose your life in vain, when we can join hands and stand shoulder-to-shoulder against the 'Commands of Rewards and Punishments' from the Isle of Heroes. Would it not be good to face this difficult problem together?"

The last two sentences struck Xie Yanke with a great shock: Have the 'Commands of Rewards and Punishments' from the Isle of Heroes reappeared in the jianghu?

Then, he heard the Benevolent Elder reply: "I am a dignified man, so how can I be willing to associate with shameless people like you? I would rather receive the 'Commands of Rewards and Punishments' and die on the Isle of Heroes. I will never join a group of evil men in an unorthodox clan that commits all sorts of crimes." Suddenly, his left hand shot out and grabbed the ugly man on the shoulder.

What a good 'Tiger's Claw' (Hu3 Zhao3 Shou3)! said Xie Yanke to himself.

The stroke was executed with such speed that the ugly man could not avoid it, although he had tried to do so by letting his shoulder drop. The slight difference in speed was all the Benevolent Elder needed to sink five fingers into his opponent's shoulder.

A moment later, a *rip* was heard. A huge piece of clothing on the ugly man's right shoulder had been torn off. In its place was a bloody wound, for a piece of his flesh had been clawed off as well.

Furious, the three men stepped up their attacks.

Meanwhile, Xie Yanke was stumped: What sort of organisation is the Clan of Eternal Happiness? Why have I not heard about it since it boasts of such highly skilled pugilists? It is probably new, having just been founded recently. What sort of person is Clan-Master Situ? Could he be the 'Eastern Tyrant of the Skies' Situ Heng? Besides Situ Heng, there is no other highly skilled pugilist by the surname

of Situ.

The fight intensified.

Roaring like a madman, the ugly fellow sent a horizontal sweep towards the Benevolent Elder, who turned sideways to avoid it. At the same time, the latter struck out at the Taoist with his fist. The sabre of the ugly man missed its target and ended up being embedded deeply in the trunk of the tree. It could not be removed despite the strength of its user. The Benevolent Elder quickly sank his right elbow into the ugly man's waist.

By then, the Benevolent Elder knew that there was no hope left for him in spite of the resistance that he had put up against his three attackers. Yet, he had been watching the surroundings and had noticed that someone was hiding behind one of the trees -- probably another opponent. He already had no means to get rid of the attackers before him, so what else could he do when the latter's reinforcements arrive? The weakest among the three attackers was the ugly man. He had to be removed before there was any opportunity for escape, so the Benevolent Elder used nine-tenths of his strength when he sank his elbow into him.

Peng The elbow hit its target. Delighted, the Benevolent Elder hurried around the tree. Just then, the Taoist's chained hammer flew out towards him. As the Benevolent Elder struck the chain with his left palm, a white light flashed before him. He moved quickly to the right, only to find that his stamina during drawn-out fights was no longer comparable to that of his prime. Before, he could move three chi (1 metre) by simply sliding his foot, but now, he had moved only two chi and seven or eight cun (0.91-0.92 metres). A soft *zip* sounded. The sword of the skinny man pierced his left shoulder and nailed him firmly to the trunk of the tree.

This development was so unexpected that the little beggar could not help but gasp in shock. He had already considered the three men's attack on the old man very unjust, so he became even more angry when the old man was finally cornered.

The skinny man spoke in a cold voice: "Master of the Isle of the White Whale, the toast that you refuse to drink has become a forfeit. Would you not throw in

your lot with our Clan of Eternal Happiness now?"

The Benevolent Elder responded by opening his eyes wide. "You know full well that I am the master of the Isle of the White Whale," he bellowed in anger. "Do you think that there are weaklings on the Isle of the White Whale who will bend their knees in surrender?" He threw himself forward in an attempt to break free, for he would rather lose his left shoulder than miss the opportunity to fight the skinny man to death.

With a sweep of his right hand, the Taoist sent the chained hammer out. The steel chain wrapped itself around the Benevolent Elder's body several times before the hammer struck him heavily on the chest. The Benevolent Elder howled before turning his head to the side and throwing up mouthfuls of blood.

That was all the little beggar could take. Dashing out of his hiding place, he shouted: "Hey, you three bad men, why are you beating up a good man?"

At this, Xie Yanke frowned: The little boy has gone to stir up trouble. A moment later, delight filled his heart: Well, that is good too. Let the three men kill him. I will not be breaking my oath if I do not rescue him. On the other hand, if he begs me for help, I will deal with the three men on his behalf.

By then, the little beggar had run to the tree and positioned himself like a shield in front of the Benevolent Elder. "You cannot continue to trouble this elderly uncle," he shouted.

The skinny man, who had realised that there was someone hiding behind him, was certain that the child had acted on an instigation. After all, he could see from the boy's gait that he was not trained in martial arts, yet he was terribly bold. Hence, he thought: Let me frighten the little imp and the man behind him will come out. Pulling his sabre out of tree trunk, he roared: "Little Imp, who asked you to get involved in your old man's matters? I am going to kill the old fellow, so are you getting out of the way or not?" He raised the sabre and slashed horizontally through the air.

"This elderly uncle is a good man," said the little beggar. "You are all bad men, so I will certainly help the good one. Chop all you want, but I will not get out of the way." When his mother was in a good mood, she would sometimes tell him stories of good and bad men. Thus, in his heart, helping a good man to beat up a

bad one was the right and proper thing to do.

"Do you know him?" asked the skinny man in anger. "How do you know that he is good?"

"He said that you are evil men from an unorthodox clan," answered the little beggar. "Since he would rather die than join you, you are naturally the bad men." Then, he turned around and reached for the chained hammer with the intention of undoing it.

At that moment, the Taoist lifted his palm and slapped the boy so hard that his head became dizzy and his vision blurred. His left cheek swelled up immediately with a red five-fingered imprint that looked like a bloody palm.

As it turned out, the little beggar simply did not know the height of the heavens and the depth of the earth. Neither did he understand the complexity of the things that were happening around him. In Hou Jian Ji the day before, he had seen the men of the Golden Sabre Stockade attack Wu Daotong, but he did not know whether Wu Daotong was good or bad. The men had been fighting on the roof, and when Wu Daotong fell off, he was stabbed immediately in the abdomen by the tall fellow with the pair of silver hooks. If that had not happened, the little beggar might have intervened without understanding the danger it posed to his life.

Since the little beggar appeared very confident and totally unafraid, the skinny man became suspicious: Just who is the little imp relying on that he would dare utter nonsense before an incense-master(3) of the Clan of Eternal Happiness? Turning sideways, he caught a glimpse of a thin figure among the trees. Someone came to mind at once: That man fits the description of the Master of the Black Steel Symbol, the Skyscraping Resident Xie Yanke. Could it be him? Hence, he lifted his sabre and roared: "I do not know what your origins are, or the organisation from which your teacher comes. Since you have come to stir up trouble, I will have to assume that you are merely an ignorant little beggar. So there is nothing wrong if I have you killed with a stroke of the sabre, is there?"

Almost immediately, the sabre came rushing through the air, right at the little beggar's neck.

The little beggar did not move at all! Not only was he unaware of the danger

that he was in, he was also resolute and unyielding.

The skinny man allowed the sabre to come within several cun (1 cun = 1/30 metres) of the boy's neck before taking it away. "Good! Your courage is not insignificant!" he said in praise.

His companion, the Taoist, was not as patient. Raising his right palm, he slapped the little beggar harder than he had done earlier. The boy yelled in pain and started to wail.

"Go away quickly if you are afraid of being hit," said the skinny man.

"You go away first," sobbed the little beggar in retort. "I will stop crying if you stop troubling this elderly uncle."

The skinny man broke into laughter, while the Taoist kicked the boy to the ground.

His nose bruised and eye swollen, the little beggar got to his feet and positioned himself once more before the Benevolent Elder. The latter was an unsociable and eccentric old man, so he had very few friends who knew him well. When he saw how the little beggar endangered his young life for his sake without even knowing who he was, he was filled with gratitude. "Little Brother, you will lose your life for no reason if you fight with them," he said. "That I, Cheng, can befriend you in my twilight years shows that my life was not lived in vain. You had better leave quickly."

The little beggar did not understand what 'twilight years' and 'my life was not lived in vain' were. All he knew was that the old man urged him to leave. Hence, he responded in a loud voice: "You are a good man. You cannot let the bad men kill you."

At this, the skinny man thought: The child's appearance is very strange. I also do not know whether the man behind the tree is Xie Yanke. It is not worth our while to make more enemies, but if we leave just because of a few words from the child, does it not show that our Clan of Eternal Happiness is afraid of others? Thus, he raised his sabre and said, "All right, Little Boy. I want to give you a test. I will slash you with thirty-six consecutive strokes. If you do not move at all, I will rest my case. So are you afraid?"

"Of course I am, if you want to slash me with thirty-six consecutive strokes," answered the little beggar.

"It is good that you are afraid," said the skinny man, "for you can hurry up and go away."

"I am frightened," said the little beggar, "but I am not going away."

The skinny man raised his thumb and said, "Good, you have backbone. Watch out!" The sabre cut across the top of the boy's head with a loud whoosh.

Xie Yanke could see the goings-on clearly from behind the tree. The horizontal stroke that the skinny man executed a moment ago was light and nimble, and done entirely with the power of the wrist according to a swordplay technique. Although he did not know the name of the stroke, he saw the skinny man moving the heavy sabre as if it was weightless. The blade slid across the little beggar's scalp and cut off a shock of hair.

The boy remained absolutely unyielding, straightening his body and standing totally still.

The sabre continued to flash this way and that, as if it was a slithering snake. The strokes, regardless of whether they came from the left or from the right, stayed close to the top of the little beggar's head, sending shock after shock of hair to the ground. After the thirty-second stroke, the skinny man roared and brought the sabre down vertically on the little beggar, slicing off the latter's right sleeve. He repeated it on the left sleeve before slashing off part of the left and right trouser-legs.

As the skinny man put the sabre away, he took the opportunity to strike the Benevolent Elder heavily on the Shan Zhong acupoint with the hilt of the sabre. Then, he laughed loudly and said, "Little Boy, you are really something, really great!"

Xie Yanke could not help but admire the skinny man's skills quietly in his heart, for the latter had used his sabre according to a swordplay technique that resulted in thirty-six full and continuous strokes without even half a flaw. When he saw the man hitting the Death Acupoint(4) of the Benevolent Elder, he thought: This fellow is very ruthless!

As for the little beggar, the thick and tousled mop of hair on his head went from bad to worse after the thirty-two indiscriminate slashes. When the sabre slid thirty-two times across the top of his head earlier, half of him had stood firm and unyielding in aid of the Benevolent Elder. The other half had actually been frightened out of its wits, so the boy had not really been unwilling to move. Instead, he had been scared totally stiff. When the skinny man was done, the boy reached out and touched his head. Finding it intact, he heaved a long sigh of relief.

The Taoist and the ugly man cheered: "Good swordplay, Incense-Master Mi!"

"Due to the courage of this young friend here today, we will step aside," said the skinny man with a smile. "Brothers, let us go!"

The Taoist and the ugly man noticed that the Benevolent Elder's breathing had become very weak after being struck by the hilt of the sabre. Since the latter would die in a twinkling of the eye, the duo picked their weapons up and began to walk away. The ugly man was particularly slow in his steps, a sign that his injuries were not insignificant.

Meanwhile, the skinny man lifted his right palm and pushed it against the tree on which the Benevolent Elder was pinned. The sword that had been embedded about a chi (1/3 metres) into the trunk, flew out upon contact with the force of the palm, bringing along a gush of fresh blood from the old man's shoulder. The skinny man caught the sword with his left hand, laughed and strode away without so much as a glance in the direction of Xie Yanke.

Xie Yanke thought: So, this skinny fellow is surnamed Mi, an incense-master in the Clan of Eternal Happiness. It is obvious that he had put on the display of skills just for me. His swordplay techniques are nimble, fast and ruthless, but he is still not equal to Shi Qing of Xuansu Manor and his wife. Does he really think that he can impress me with such skills? Ha ha! Going by his usual temperament, he would have gone up and taught Mi a lesson for showing off his abilities. If the latter showed the slightest sign of disrespect, he would have had him killed at once. However, since the oath of the Black Steel Symbol had not been fulfilled, Xie Yanke was unwilling to get himself into unnecessary trouble. Hence, he had constrained himself to watching the proceedings from the side.

The little beggar turned to the Benevolent Elder and said, "Elderly Uncle, let me bandage your wounds." He picked up the sleeve that the skinny man had sliced off earlier and began bandaging the wound on the old man's shoulder.

His eyes tightly closed, the Benevolent Elder said, "No ... no need! In my pocket ... there are clay figurines ... for you ... You ... " Before he could finish, his head suddenly fell forward. He was dead. A moment later, his tall and big-sized body slid slowly down to the roots of the tree.

"Elderly Uncle, Elderly Uncle!" cried the little beggar in shock as he reached out to support the man. Then, he realised that the latter had already curled up into a still and unmoving mass.

Xie Yanke walked into scene and asked: "What did he say before dying?"

"He said ... he said ... in his pocket are clay figurines for me," replied the little beggar.

Xie Yanke said to himself: The Benevolent Elder was a strange but outstanding man of the martial arts circle. He was not much different from me in terms of martial arts knowledge, practice and cultivation, so perhaps he really had some important items with him. Since Xie Yanke thought highly of himself, he was unwilling to take anything from a dead man. Even if he knew that there was something extremely rare and valuable in the dead man's pocket, he would have turned and left as well. So he said, "Since he has given them to you, take them."

"He gave me to me, so if I take them, will I be a little thief?" asked the little beggar.

"No," answered Xie Yanke with a smile.

The little beggar reached into the Benevolent Elder's pocket and groped around. Then, he brought out a wooden box, several silver ingots, seven or eight thorn-covered projectiles, a few letters and something that looked like a map. Xie Yanke wanted to look at the contents of the letters and the map, but he knew that as soon as he touched the objects, his reputation as a man of noble character in the martial arts circle would be gone. Hence, he kept his hands to himself.

By then, the little beggar had already opened the wooden box. Beneath a layer

of cotton were three rows of figurines made from clay. Each row had six individual figurines, making a total of eighteen. Exquisitely made, each figurine was an unclothed male with a body that was dusted with white chalk and decorated with red lines and black dots. These lines and dots represented the arteries and veins (mai4 luó4) and the acupuncture points of the body respectively.

Xie Yanke took one look and knew immediately that the lines and dots on the figurines were actually a set of techniques for cultivating internal strength. He thought: Old Benevolent did an empty favour before he died. Even if you did not give them to him, would a child not take the items that he finds on your body and play with them?

As for the little beggar, he was delighted with the gift. "The clay people are really interesting," he said. "Why are they not wearing clothes? They are fun to play with. If Mother is willing to sew them some clothes, it would be even better."

Xie Yanke thought: Although I never got along well with Old Benevolent, he was still a man worthy of his name. His bones cannot be left exposed in the wilderness! So he turned to the little beggar and said, "You old friend is dead. Are you not going to bury him?"

"Yes, yes," answered the little beggar. "But how should I do it?"

"If you have the strength, dig him a hole," said Xie Yanke wanly. "If you do not, just pile some earth and rocks on his body."

"There is no hoe here, so I cannot dig a hole," said the little beggar. Thus, he began piling earth, rocks, branches and leaves on the corpse of the Benevolent Elder until it was completely covered. Being young, he was not as strong as an adult, so by the time he was done, he was drenched with perspiration.

Meanwhile, Xie Yanke stood by the side and watched without offering any help. When the job was finished, he said, "Let us go!"

"Where?" asked the little beggar. "I am very tired; I will not go with you!"

"Why will you not come with me?" asked Xie Yanke.

"I want to look for my mother," answered the little beggar. "And A'Huang too."

Xie Yanke was startled: The child has not begged me for anything from the beginning until the end. If he is unwilling to come with me, things will become difficult. Yet, I cannot use force and pull him along. I know! Years ago, I swore not to use force on the person who hands me the Black Steel Symbol, but I did not say that I could not use deceit. I have no choice but to deceive him. So, he said, "Come with me; I will help you look for your mother and A'Huang."

The little beggar was delighted. "All right," he said, "I will go with you. You are very capable, so you can definitely find my mother and A'Huang."

There is no point in talking further, thought Xie Yanke. I am fortunate that he has not opened his mouth to beg me, or I would not know where to look for his mother and that dog. This is a terribly difficult matter indeed. He reached for the boy's right hand and said, "We must go faster."

No sooner had the little beggar answered "Yes!", he felt his body rising involuntarily and moving as if in flight. "How interesting, how interesting!" he said again and again. As the cold wind blew in his face and the trees swept by, he could not stop cheering: "Elderly Uncle, you are pulling me along and running so fast!"

+ + +

Night fell. The little beggar did not know how far they had travelled. Yet, he could see that they were in a remote and mountainous area. Then, Xie Yanke released his hand. The little beggar found his legs weak and aching. He shook twice, before sitting heavily on the ground. A moment later, the soles of his feet began to hurt badly. He soon realised that his feet were red and swollen. "Elderly Uncle," he gasped in shock. "My feet have swelled up."

"If you beg me to heal you," said Xie Yanke, "I will remove the pain and swelling at once."

"If you are willing to heal me, I will naturally be grateful," said the little beggar in return.

Xie Yanke frowned. "Is it true that you have never opened your mouth to beg anyone for anything?" he asked.

"If you are willing to heal me, I do not have to beg you," answered the little

beggar. "If not, there is no point in begging anyway."

"Why not?" asked Xie Yanke.

The little beggar replied: "If you are unwilling to heal me, I will feel sad. Since my feet hurt, I may cry. If you do not know how to heal me, trying to help will just make you feel sad."

"Hmmpf! I have never felt sad!" declared Xie Yanke. "Little Beggar, we will sleep here tonight!" Then, he thought: Since this child does not open his mouth to beg others, I cannot call him 'Little Beggar' anymore.

Although his feet hurt, the boy was so tired out by the day's running that he leaned against the trunk of a tree and promptly fell into a deep sleep. He even forgot about his hunger pangs. As for Xie Yanke, he leapt to the top of a tree to sleep. He hoped that a wild beast would come in the middle of the night and have the boy mauled and eaten. Then, his difficulties would be over. Yet, to his surprise, not even a hare passed by that night.

The next morning, Xie Yanke said to himself: I had better take him to the Skyscraping Cliff. If he opens his mouth and begs me for a simple favour, he is a fortunate boy. If not, I would have to find a way to take his life. Who is the Skyscraping Resident anyway, being unable to deal with even a child? Taking the boy by the hand, he resumed the journey.

To the boy, the first few steps felt like ten thousand tiny needles piercing the soles of his feet. They hurt so much that he could not help but yell out in pain.

"What is wrong?" asked Xie Yanke, hoping that the reply would be 'Let us rest for a while'.

But the boy answered: "Nothing. The soles of my feet hurt a little. Let us go."

Furious and exasperated, Xie Yanke dragged him and hurried on.

The duo travelled south without stopping. Whenever they passed through a town, Xie Yanke would simply grab some cooked meat or wheat cakes from a restaurant or a cake-shop. Then, he would eat on the run. If he gave the boy some food, the latter would eat. If he did not, the boy would not ask for it either.

This went on for days. By the sixth day, the duo entered the high mountain

ridges. The boy was not trained in martial arts, yet with the help of Xie Yanke, he was able to hold out against the rigours of travel. During this time, Xie Yanke hoped that the boy would beg him for a rest, but the wish never materialised. Eventually, the old man could not help but admire the unyielding spirit of the boy.

After travelling for yet another day, the terrain became increasingly steep and dangerous. When the boy could no longer climb, Xie Yanke had no alternative but to carry him on his back as he leapt from cliff to cliff. This manner of travel terrified the boy so much that he had to close his eyes time and again, especially when the leap was genuinely alarming.

+ + +

It was around noon when Xie Yanke arrived at a cliff that stood as straight as writing brush. Grabbing the iron chain that hung down from the top of the cliff, he began to climb. The face of the cliff was bare, without any handholds or footholds to assist anyone who was going up or down. If not for that iron chain, Xie Yanke would not have been able to ascend it, no matter how great his martial arts skills were.

When Xie Yanke arrived at the peak, he let the boy off his back and said, "This is the Skyscraping Cliff. My nickname, 'The Skyscraping Resident', comes from this place. You had better settle down here as well!"

The boy looked around him. The peak was quite spacious, but the sight of the curling clouds and mists as well as the thought of being so high up in the air filled his heart with fear. "You said that you would help me find my mother and A'Huang," he said.

"The world is so vast," answered Xie Yanke in a cold voice. "How would I know where your mother is? We will just wait here. Perhaps one day, your mother will come and see you with A'Huang in tow."

Although the boy was young and ignorant, he could tell that Xie Yanke was lying. How could his mother find this dangerously steep and isolated place, much less climb all the way up? As for A'Huang making the ascent, it was an even greater impossibility. Thus, the boy was dumbfounded.

Xie Yanke went on: "Just beg me when you want to descend the peak, and I will

take you down at once." Then, he said to himself: I will not give you anything to eat. Since you are unable to go down by yourself, you will have to open your mouth and beg me eventually.

The boy had always been treated with coldness and detachment by his mother, but he had never been deceived by her before. Thus, this was the first time in his entire life that he had been lied to. He was so upset that his eyes brimmed over with tears, yet he forced himself to hold the tears back.

Xie Yanke strode into a cave nearby. After a while, black smoke came out of the cave, a sign that some cooking was going on inside. More time passed, and a fragrant aroma came floating out. The boy was very hungry, so he walked into the cave.

The cave was rather spacious, but Xie Yanke had deliberately set the stove and the pot up at its mouth, so that the boy would ask him for some of the food that he had been cooking. He did not know that the boy and his mother had depended on each other for a living, so he never knew the meaning of 'yours' and 'mine'. When there was food, he would eat, for where was the need to ask?

Since there was a plate of cured meat (la4 rou4, or smoked/preserved meat) and a big pot of rice on the stone table, the boy simply picked up a bowl and a pair of chopsticks. Then, he scooped himself some rice, took some meat and began to eat.

Xie Yanke's heart skipped a beat: He treated me to 'mantou', jujubes, alcohol and rice. If I do not allow him to eat my food, I would obviously be breaking the code of friendship. So, he ignored the boy.

But the boy was used to such a way of life, where two people living together had no words to share. Meals were simply eaten with heads bowed in silence. Hence, after he had finished eating, he went off to wash the bowl and chopsticks and scrub the pot. He also chopped some firewood. All these were chores that he did when he lived with his mother not too long ago.

As he was about to return to the cave with a bundle of firewood that he had chopped, a rustle was heard among the trees. A river deer (zhang1 zi3) appeared from the undergrowth. The boy lifted his axe and brought it down on the head of the deer, killing it at once. Then, he had it skinned and cleaned by a mountain

stream before heading back to the cave, where he had more than half the meat hung up in a windy spot for air-drying(5). Finally, he chopped two of the legs up into small pieces and cooked them in a pot.

Xie Yanke found the thick broth of river deer very fragrant, so he used a wooden ladle to help himself to a mouthful. As a result, he was both delighted and worried at the same time. The broth was so delicious that it exceeded his own cooking abilities more than ten times over, so he thought: Since the child has such a skill, I will no longer be wanting when it comes to good food. Then, he had another thought: He can hunt and cook, so if he does not beg me to take him down the cliff, there is really nothing that I can do.

+ + +

The days passed quickly on the Skyscraping Cliff. The boy's ability at organising and preparing traps for sparrows and other animals were really not poor, so he had plenty of fresh game to cook and share with Xie Yanke. He also had any meat that was left over air-dried or pickled. There was something distinctive about the way he cooked; although the style was rustic, there was often a certain touch of craftsmanship about it.

Amidst compliments and praises, Xie Yanke would ask about the origins of the various dishes. The boy would always reply that they were taught to him by his mother. After close questioning, Xie Yanke discovered that the boy's mother was actually a skilled and knowledgeable cook, despite her frequent displays of irritability and carelessness. She would ask him to cook nine meals out of ten, and if a particular meal did not suit her tastes, she would point his mistakes out when she was in good spirits. However, if she was in a foul mood, she would simply hit and curse the boy.

Xie Yanke thought: Since both woman and child can cook so well, they must be very intelligent people. So it follows that the woman became unsociable, eccentric and perverse after her husband left her. Then again, it could be because of her unreasonable temper that her husband left.

He was also somewhat concerned about the boy's lack of conversation with him: If this matter is not resolved quickly, it will remain a pain in the neck. What will I do if the boy is misled by my enemies one day and ends up begging me to

destroy my martial arts or limbs? Or, what if he begs me never to take a step away from the Skyscraping Cliff? Would Xie Yanke then not end up being imprisoned alive on this barren peak? And if he simply begs me to look for his mother and that yellow dog, it would be a terrible headache for me as well.

Despite his intelligence and resourcefulness, Xie Yanke could not think of a good solution.

One afternoon, as he was taking a leisurely stroll in the woods, Xie Yanke found the boy leaning against a rock and smiling at a pile of objects on it. When he took a closer look, he discovered that the objects were the eighteen clay figurines that the Benevolent Elder had given the boy. The boy placed a figurine here and another there, before arranging them in a row and having them fight one another in a mock battle. He seemed quite happy playing with them.

Xie Yanke thought: Years ago, the Benevolent Elder and I had a duel in northern Mount Mang. His palm techniques were strong and powerful, while his seizing techniques were swift and varied. After spending the larger half of a 'shichen'(6) (i.e. more than an hour) in battle, he finally lost by a stroke to my 'Crane Controlling Skill' (Kong4 He4 Gong1). Then, he realised the difficult position that he was in and eventually retreated. Although he was a highly-accomplished pugilist, his strengths were only found in external techniques(7). So, the internal strength cultivation techniques shown on the bodies of these clay figurines are probably very superficial and laughable in the face of martial experts.

Picking up a figurine without much thought, he noticed that it was marked with the Yong Quan, Ran Gu, Zhao Hai, Tai Xi, Shui Quan, Tai Zhong, Fu Liu and Jiao Xin acupoints that ran along the leg up to the abdomen. From there, the marks continued along the Heng Gu, Tai He, Qi Xue, Si Man, Zhong Zhu, Mang Yu and Shang Qu acupoints all the way to the Lian Quan acupoint on the tongue. The line thus formed between the sole of the foot and the throat was the 'Foot Shaoyin Channel of the Kidney' (zu2 shao4 yin1 shen4 jing1).

He thought: This is indeed the correct way of cultivating internal strength. Since the entry-level practices of the various well-known pugilistic clans and schools do not differ much between one and the other, how could these figurines be of value? Yes! The Benevolent Elder focused on external techniques

all his life. Roaming the length and the breadth of the jianghu during his prime, he eventually realised that his skills could not be compared to that of others. So he must have obtained these eighteen clay figurines from some unknown place, with the intention of practising the internal and external techniques concurrently. Perhaps, this desire arose after he lost to me. But the best internal strength techniques cannot be learnt in a day and a night. The Benevolent Elder was already more than seventy years old, so he could only work on his internal strength in the netherworld. Ha ha ha ha ha!

After such a train of thought, he could not help but laugh out loud.

The boy smiled and said, "Uncle, look, these clay people have beards, so they are not children. Yet, they are not wearing any clothes. How funny!"

"Yes!" answered Xie Yanke. "How very funny indeed!" Picking up each figurine in turn, he saw that twelve of them were marked individually with one of the Twelve Regular Channels (zheng4 jing1 shi2 er4 mai4): the Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung, the Hand Yangming Channel of the Colon, the Foot Yangming Channel of the Stomach, the Foot Taiyin Channel of the Spleen, the Hand Shaoyin Channel of the Heart, the Hand Taiyang Channel of the Small Intestine, the Foot Taiyang Channel of the Urinary Bladder, the Foot Shaoyin Channel of the Kidney, the Hand Jueyin Channel of the Pericardium, the Hand Shaoyang Channel of the Three Visceral Cavities, the Foot Shaoyang Channel of the Gall Bladder and the Foot Jueyin Channel of the Liver. The other six figurines were marked with six of the Eight Extraordinary Channels (qi2 jing1 ba1 mai4): Ren, Du, Yinwei, Yangwei, Yinjiao and Yangjiao. However, the two remaining and most complicated channels of Chong and Dai were missing.

Xie Yanke thought: These look like the entry-level practices for internal strength cultivation from the Shaolin School. Yet, this set of figurines that the Benevolent Elder treasured enough to carry around is incomplete. Come to think of it, if he really wanted to learn some internal strength techniques, all he had to do was to find an ordinary disciple from a school of internal techniques and have him act as an instructor for several months. Then, Old Benevolent would have understood these simple and shallow techniques. Sigh, he was a senior hero with an established name, so how could he have humbled himself and begged others for instruction?

At this point, Xie Yanke began to feel slightly miserable. He remembered the duel he had with the Benevolent Elder on northern Mount Mang. Although he had won by a stroke, it had really been a dangerous undertaking that gave him victory by sheer luck. He thought: It was a good thing that he did not have any foundations in internal strength cultivation. If he had trained up on it during his youth, he would have thrown me into the ravine within three hundred strokes. *Hei hei*, he has died well, died well indeed!

Xie Yanke walked away with a smile on his face. After a few steps, a thought occurred to him: The child is happy playing with the clay figurines. Why do I not seize the opportunity and teach him the internal strength techniques shown on them? I can deliberately lead him into over-practising and a subsequent infatuation with power(8). Then, the energy thus accumulated would burst through his heart and have him killed. In my oath years ago, I swore not to lay a finger on the boy, but since he would die from his own cultivation of internal strength, I would not be considered his murderer. Even if I am the one who has decided to harm his life, I will not be doing it by 'laying a finger on his him'. So, I will still not be breaking the oath. Yes, this is what I will do.

He had always acted according to his own likes and dislikes. Although he would keep his word in accordance to the high value that he placed on "trust", he did not find humanity, justice and virtue worthy of a single wen (a copper-cash). Hence, he picked up the clay figurine with the markings of the 'Foot Shaoyin Channel of the Kidney' and said, "Little Boy, do you know what these black dots and red lines are?"

The boy thought for a few moments; then, he answered: "The clay people are ill."

"How is it that they are ill?" asked Xie Yanke in surprise.

"When I fell ill last year, my entire body had red spots," said the boy.

Xie Yanke could not help but burst into laughter: "That was measles! The markings on these clay people are not measles, but a secret code for learning martial arts. Look at how I flew up here with you on my back. Were my martial arts skills good?"

Suddenly, he pushed himself straight with his feet and shot all the way up to

the top of a pine tree nearby. Then, using his left foot as a lever against a branch, he bounced upwards in a delicate curl and came gently down. Almost at once, he bounced up again, eventually repeating the up-and-down routine three times. At the end of it, two sparrows happened to fly by, so Xie Yanke -- who had deliberately put on the show to strengthen the boy's desire in learning martial arts -- caught the birds in his palm before landing gracefully on the ground.

"What good abilities! What good abilities!" said the boy, smiling and clapping his hands in appreciation.

Xie Yanke opened his palms, and displayed the two sparrows that were flapping their wings as if in preparation for flight. But just as the birds were about to take off, a burst of internal strength went forth from Xie Yanke's each of palms and diffused the energy that the birds had worked up.

The boy was very impressed. "How fun, how fun!" he exclaimed. After all, the old man's palms were completely open, yet the sparrows could not fly away despite the amount of urgent flapping that they did with their wings.

"You try!" said Xie Yanke with a smile, putting both sparrows into the palms of the boy. The boy grabbed the birds and did not dare to loosen his grip.

Xie Yanke went on: "The markings on the clay figurines are the techniques for learning this skill. You risked your life to help that elderly man, and he gave the figurines to you in gratitude. They are not toys, but very valuable objects. So long as you master the techniques shown by the red lines and black dots on the bodies of the clay figurines, you can open your palms and the sparrows will not fly away."

"This is so fun," said the boy. "I will certainly want learn it, but how should it be done?" As he spoke, he opened his palms. The two sparrows spread their wings and flew away.

Xie Yanke laughed, prompting the boy to laugh foolishly along as well.

"I will teach you this skill if you beg me," said the old man. "After you have learnt it, you will have a lot of fun. You can go up and down this peak all by yourself, for you will no longer need me to carry you."

The boy seemed very interested, so Xie Yanke looked closely at him, hoping

that the words 'I beg you to teach me' would come out of his mouth. He was so anxious for the response that he began to breathe heavily.

After quite a while, the boy said, "If I beg you, you will beat me. So I will not beg."

"Go ahead and beg," said Xie Yanke. "I have told you that I will not beat you. You have followed me for quite some time; have I ever beaten you?"

"No," answered the boy, shaking his head. "But I will not beg you to teach me." As it turned out, the boy had been deeply scarred by the abuse that he had suffered since young in the hands of his mother. Regardless of what the matter was, he would be beaten as soon as he opened his mouth and made a request. In addition, his mother would often burst into tears after beating him and remain upset for several days. During this time, she would talk constantly to herself: "The One Without a Conscience, I have been waiting for you to come and beg me. But I have waited day and night for several years, yet you have not come. Instead, you have gone to beg that little slut who cannot even hold a candle to me. Why then would you come and beg me?"

The boy did not understand his mother's ramblings, but he remembered the words: "You have come to beg me? It is already too late. Why did you not beg me earlier?" Then, a thick stick would come down mercilessly on his head. The beatings that ensued were quite unbearable, so after several such occurrences, he stopped begging his mother altogether. He was about eight or nine years old then.

The days that the boy spent with Xie Yanke in the barren and remote mountains were no different from the life he led with his mother. Hence, in his heart, he had come to regard the "Elderly Uncle" as his mother, a transition that occurred quite unconsciously for him.

A flash of green passed over Xie Yanke's face: If you had opened your mouth and begged a moment ago, and allowed me to fulfil my oath, I would have taught you enough skills to stand proud in the martial arts circle. But now, you have chosen the route of death yourself, so I cannot be blamed. Then, nodding of his head, he said, "All right. You do not want to beg me but I will still teach you." Picking up the clay figurine that was marked with the 'Foot Shaoyin

Channel of the Kidney', he explained the names of the individual acupoints shown and pointed out their positions on the human body.

The boy was not innately dull, so he made an effort to remember what he had heard. If there was anything that he did not understand, he would raise questions in clarification. Xie Yanke instructed him without with-holding any information, before moving on to the techniques of exercising and circulating the internal energy in the body. Finally, he ordered the boy to practise the techniques by himself.

More than half a year later, the boy had made enough progress to circulate his energy through the 'Foot Shaoyin Channel of the Kidney'. The speed at which he had made this achievement caused Xie Yanke to think: I did not realise that you, the 'gouzazhong' (bastard), has turned out to be an excellent candidate for learning martial arts. But the faster you learn, the earlier you will die. Then, the old man taught the boy the acupoints along the 'Hand Shaoyin Channel of the Heart'.

The techniques shown on the other clay figurines soon followed, with the boy learning them one after the other. More than two years later, he had mastered all the six yin channels. Besides the 'Foot Shaoyin Channel of the Kidney', these were the 'Foot Jueyin Channel of the Liver', the 'Hand Jueyin Channel of the Pericardium', the 'Foot Taiyin Channel of the Spleen' and the 'Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung'. Then, he began practising the techniques associated with the Channels of 'Yinwei' and 'Yinjiao'.

In addition to training diligently three times a day -- in the morning, afternoon and evening -- the boy continued to trap and hunt animals, as well as cook meat and rice, like he usually did. He did not have the slightest suspicion that each time Xie Yanke taught him a technique, it took him a step closer to the netherworld. Yet, as he neared the completion of the yin series, he often experienced shivers that were unbearably cold. When Xie Yanke told him that these shivers were the expected products of practising the internal strength techniques, he paid no further attention to them. He simply never guessed that Xie Yanke would have a wicked motive: although the techniques taught were not wrong, the sequence in which the teaching was carried out was completely reversed.

The cultivation of internal strength had always emphasised the complement of the yin and the yang, regardless of whether it was for strengthening the body and healing illnesses, or setting a foundation prior to the learning of top-notch martial arts techniques. Fire and water -- in an allusion to two things that are diametrically opposed to each other -- had to work hand-in-hand with each other, so after learning the 'Foot Shaoyin Channel of the Kidney', the 'Foot Shaoyang Channel of the Gall Bladder' should be learnt next. When the Shaoyin and the Shaoyang were blended in harmony, the strength of the body would increase.

However, Xie Yanke had told him to practise only the channels of Shaoyin, Jueyin, Taiyin, Yinwei and Yinjiao, without teaching him any of the complementary channels of Shaoyang, Yangming and the others. Consequently, the yin energy in the boy's body increased immensely over the years, while his yang energy declined. In fact, the accumulated yin energy had reached such dangerous levels that the slightest misstep would immediately be fatal.

Yet, although Xie Yanke could see the invasion of the yin energy in his body, the boy had strangely remained very much alive. Almost at once, he understood. The boy was simple and ignorant all along, without any knowledge of the affairs around him or any thoughts that might have distracted him from his training. Hence, he had not reached the point of over-practising and infatuation with power. If it were someone else, he would have been interrupted by the unavoidable emotions and desires of life, and died a long time ago from the slightest flight of fancy that arose.

Xie Yanke thought: This 'gouzazhong' (bastard) is now stuck on this cliff with me, and I am afraid that he has to suffer for a number of years to come. If I allow him to leave, he would probably die within days of contact with the dazzling temptations of the human world. So long as this 'gouzazhong' is alive, people can use him to threaten me, so I cannot take such a dangerous risk. After some thought, he had an idea: I will teach him the techniques associated with the 'yang' channels, without telling him how to harmonise the 'yin' and the 'yang'. When the 'yang' energy in his body has reached a certain level of accumulation, it will begin to collide with the 'yin' energy. A dragon and a tiger in battle will not stop until one of them is dead. So even if there are no

distracting thoughts in his heart and mind, he would still die as a result of the disharmony of energies. Yes, this plan is wonderful indeed.

Thus, he started teaching the boy the techniques associated with the Yangjiao Channel(9). He did not follow the sequence of imparting the techniques of the Shaoyang, Yangming and Taiyang Channels first; instead, he had begun with the second most difficult Channel of Yangjiao. As for the Ren and Du Channels that allowed the connection of the yin and yang energies, he ignored them not because the boy had not attained a suitable level of internal energy, but because learning the techniques associated with them did not fit into his plan.

As for the boy, he simply practised as he had been instructed. Although progress was considerably slow, he had a naturally high level of persistence that pushed him along. More than a year later, he finally mastered the Yangjiao Channel. The channels that ensued were increasingly easier to learn.

During this time, Xie Yanke would leave the cliff with the boy and go shopping whenever the salt, rice, wine and sauces in his abode ran out. He was uncomfortable about leaving the boy alone on the cliff because he was afraid that someone would seize the opportunity and abduct the boy in his absence. This was equivalent to handing his own life over to someone else. Leaving the cliff several times a year, they would return immediately after buying all the groceries needed at the nearest town. They had never stayed longer than necessary.

The boy grew taller by the day. The clothes, shoes and socks that were bought for him became increasingly bigger as well.

+ + +

The boy was already a young man of eighteen or nineteen years old. Well-built and sturdy, he stood more than half a head taller than Xie Yanke.

Xie Yanke hardly talked to him beyond what was necessary for teaching him the techniques of internal energy cultivation. Fortunately, the young man was accustomed to such a way of life, for he had lived with his mother -- who also treated him in coldness and detachment - since he was a child. In addition, his mother often indulged in hitting and scolding, but Xie Yanke did not. Not only was the old man neither pleased nor angry, he never laid a single finger on the

young man.

There were no distractions on the cliff. So besides trapping and hunting animals for food, the young man had nothing but the practise of martial arts to while away the time. This, in a few fast years, he had almost reached the point of mastery in his practice of the techniques associated with the various yang channels.

As for Xie Yanke, he had chosen to live in seclusion on the Skyscraping Cliff after encountering a terribly disappointing incident at the age of thirty. Hence, he was seldom found roaming the realm of the rivers and lakes. This lack of presence in the jianghu increased in recent years, as he did not dare to leave the company of the young man. Thus, besides practising the martial arts techniques of his clan in a diligent manner, he had found time to develop new sets of techniques for the fist and the palm.

One day, Xie Yanke woke up early and found the young man sitting cross-legged on a round boulder in the eastern side of the cliff. With his face towards the first rays of the morning sun, the young man practised his internal strength. Xie Yanke saw a thin whitish wisp of steam rising from the right side of the young man's head, a sign that he had accomplished a significant level of cultivation in internal strength. Xie Yanke found himself nodding his head and saying, "Young man, you already have one foot inside the gates of hell." He knew that it would be another shichen (two hours) before the young man was finished with the exercise, so he used his qinggong and sped to a pine forest at the far end of the cliff.

The morning dew had not evaporated, so the forest was filled with a refreshing fragrance. Xie Yanke took a deep breath before exhaling slowly. Suddenly, his left palm reached forward, followed by a strike with his right. His body moved according to his palms, weaving in and out among a patch of more than ten enormous pines. Increasing his speed, his palms swept around and struck out repeatedly at the trunks of the trees as a series of soft *ca-ca-ca* sounds were heard. Then, his footsteps became even more accelerated, but his palm movements began to slow down. This contrast in movement -- where speed did not belie urgency and leisure did not reduce ruthlessness -- was among the top accomplishments in the study of martial arts.

Xie Yanke soon became so excited that he suddenly let out a clear whistle and struck the trunk of a pine twice with his palms. A rustling sound followed and pine needles began falling around him like rain. Using his palm techniques, Xie Yanke sent the tens of thousands of pine needles back up towards the sky. Although the needles continued to fall from the trees, the energy that he had worked up with his palms kept these needles from reaching the ground.

The pine needles were sharp, thin and heavy, unlike ordinary leaves that could be carried by the wind with ease. Yet, Xie Yanke, through the strength of his palms, was able to make tens of thousands of pine needles dance in the wind. Although a person's internal strength was quite invisible, Xie Yanke's had developed a vague sense of coagulation.

The tens of thousands of pine needles soon became a green shadowy mass, enveloping the spiralling figure of Xie Yanke within it.

Definitions and/or words left (mostly) in their original form:

1. *Mantou (man2 tou2) = a type of steamed bread that is often sold as white-coloured fist-sized lumps/buns. Usually plain or unflavoured, but may occasionally be slightly sweetened.*

2. *Baijiu (bai2 jiu3) = a clear/colourless spirit (alcohol) that is usually distilled from sorghum or maize.*

3. *Incense-master (xiang1 zhu3) = a low-to mid-level position of leadership in a clan or sect. Title originates from one of the responsibilities of the position, i.e. to offer incense to deities, ancestors and/or other foci of worship.*

4. *Death Acupoint (si3 xue2) = see "Shan Zhong acupoint" in Facts and Figures.*

5. *Air-drying = a way of preserving meat for later consumption, usually carried out where outdoor temperatures are low enough to prevent decomposition.*

6. *Shichen (shi2 chen2) = a method of calculating time with two-hour slots; where one shichen is two hours.*

7. *External techniques (wai4 jia1 gong1 fu1) = see "Martial Arts Snippets" in*

Facts and Figures.

8. *Over-practising and a subsequent infatuation with power (zou2 huo3 ru4 mo2) = see "Martial Arts Snippets" in Facts and Figures.*

9. *Yangjiao Channel = one of the Eight Extraordinary Channels. See "Medicines, Medical Treatments and Bodily Matters" in Facts and Figures.*

Chapter 4 - The Leader of the Clan of Eternal Happiness

The girl took the spoon, scooped some birds' nest from the bowl and sent the spoon towards his mouth. The young man opened his mouth and ate the birds' nest offered. It was sweet, fragrant and thoroughly enjoyable. The girl fed him three more spoonfuls without uttering a single word, while standing as far away from the side of the bed as she could manage.

Xie Yanke wanted to test the extent of the internal strength that he had diligently practised and cultivated over the years, so he kept on exercising his energy and causing the pine needles to move with increasing speed. Then, he enlarged the circle of needles by moving its outer edges further and further apart. As the circle grew in size, the internal strength needed to maintain it became somewhat insufficient. Finally, the pine needles in the outermost edges of the circle began falling to the ground.

Xie Yanke took a breath. When he exhaled, he did so with a burst of internal strength. Hence, the number of falling pine needles began to decrease. Thoroughly delighted, Xie Yanke exercised his energy again, and felt an indescribable sense of comfort when he raised his arms and feet. He became so excited that he soon forgot the distinction between object and man.

A long time passed and the accumulated energy in his body began to wane. If he forced himself to go on, his health would be affected, so he began holding his energy back in a gentle manner. The pine needles soon drifted down to the ground, forming a circle of green around him.

Xie Yanke looked up and smiled in great satisfaction. Suddenly, the expression of his face changed, for there were now people standing in front of and behind him, as well as on his left and right. Totalling nine altogether, they looked at him without uttering a single word.

A man with Xie Yanke's level of pugilistic accomplishment would have not missed people standing a li or two (0.5-1.0km) away, much less anyone who tried to approach him at close quarters. Yet, he had been so completely focused

on exercising his internal strength and testing the 'Green Needles Clean-Palm Technique' (Bi4 Zhen1 Qing1 Zhang3) that he had reached the point of looking without seeing and listening without hearing. Hence, the mountain could have collapsed and the ocean could have roared, yet he might not have heard the noise.

Outsiders had never come to the Skyscraping Cliff before, so Xie Yanke knew that the sudden appearance of these men had nothing benevolent about it. As he looked closely at them, he recognised the skinny man, the Taoist and the ugly man who had attacked and killed the Benevolent Elder in the outskirts of Bianliang years ago. These were members of the Clan of Eternal Happiness.

A million thoughts went through his mind at once: Regardless of who they are, it is clear that they despise me by showing up on the Skyscraping Cliff without a single sound. They are also not hesitant about taking me as an enemy, yet I have never had any connections with the Clan of Eternal Happiness. So why have they come in such a large group? Could it be that they want to coerce me into joining their clan through the use of force, just as they had done to the Benevolent Elder? Then, he had another thought: I have seen the pugilistic abilities of three of these men. Going by the prowess that they had displayed years ago, I can fight them into a draw. So there is nothing to be concerned about in that respect. But what about the abilities of the other six?

These six were more than forty years old each, and at least two of them seemed to possess a considerably rich level of internal strength.

Xie Yanke smiled. "Are you all friends from the Clan of Eternal Happiness?" he asked coldly. "Your visit to the Skyscraping Cliff is quite unexpected, so I have missed the opportunity to greet you from afar. May I know the advice that you have for me?" As he spoke, he raised his clasped fists in a slight salute.

The nine men returned his greeting in unison with clasped fists of their own. They had seen the shocking level of internal strength that he displayed while practising the Green Needles Clean-Palm Technique earlier, but they did not realise that he had been engrossed enough to miss their appearance. Instead, they thought that he was overconfidence and conceited about his high level of accomplishment in martial arts, and thus, totally unbothered by their presence. When they saw him raising his clasped fists in greeting, they were so afraid that

he would harm them with his internal strength that they silently used their own energies to protect the vital acupoints in their bodies. In doing so, the Taiyang acupoints in the temples of two of the men swelled up at once, while the robes of a third man floated around him.

They did not know that Xie Yanke did not gather any internal strength in his fists when he raised them in greeting. They did not even know that he had gone all out during the testing of the Green Needles Clean-Palm Technique. Now, his condition was just like that of a top-notch pugilist after a great battle, with nine-tenths of his internal strength gone.

An old man dressed in yellow said, "My brothers and I came in boldness. Having committed this breach of etiquette, we hope that Mr Xie would pardon our offence."

Xie Yanke saw that the man's face was pale. His voice, though audible, had no power in it. He seemed to be suffering from a serious illness. Suddenly, Xie Yanke remembered a particular person and blurted out a question: "Are you the 'Touch that Brings Back Life' (Zhao² Shou³ Hui² Chun¹), the Physician Bei?"

The man was indeed the 'Touch that Brings Back Life' Bei Haishi himself. He could not help but feel a tinge of pride, for Xie Yanke knew of him and his reputation. Coughing twice, he said, "I do not deserve this, for my humble name is unworthy of mention by your honoured self. The nickname 'Touch that Brings Back Life' falls short of the reality, and causes much laughter among experts."

"As far as I know, the Physician Bei has always come and gone alone," said Xie Yanke. "When did you enter into an alliance with the Clan of Eternal Happiness?"

"The strength of a man is rather limited," answered Bei Haishi. "The brothers in my clan pool their wisdom and efforts, so when they come together to work on a task, it becomes easier. *Cough cough* Mr Xie, we have indeed acted rashly in visiting you. As a man of generosity, please do not take offence at our invasion of your mountain! *Cough cough* A man never goes to the temple for no reason. We have some matters that require an audience with the leader of our clan, so we would like to trouble you, Mr Xie, with the task of presenting us to him."

Xie Yanke was puzzled. "Who is your clan-leader?" he asked. "I seldom set foot in the realm of the rivers and lakes, so I am quite ignorant and ill-informed. Do

pardon my lack of manners, but since I do not know the great name of your leader, how am I supposed to present you to him?"

As soon as these words came out of his mouth, the nine visitors became indignant and displeased.

Bei Haishi placed his left hand over the short moustache above his lip and coughed a few times. "Mr Xie," he said, "since our Clan-Leader Shi has befriended you and walked hand-in-hand with you, it is only natural for all our members to honour you as if you are our distinguished guest. We do not dare to be rude, regardless of how slight that may be. As subordinates, we do not have the audacity to question the whereabouts of our Clan-Leader Shi. However, he has left our headquarters for far too long. There are many things that he needs to see to, especially two great matters that are extremely pressing at the moment. *Cough cough* Thus, as soon as we heard that Clan-Leader Shi is on the peak of the Skyscraping Cliff, we hurriedly made our way here. We should have presented our calling card first and obtained your approval before coming up, but due to the urgency of the matter, we have been lacking in this respect. Please do forgive us." He ended his speech with a deep bow.

Xie Yanke found him rather sincere. Although the nine visitors had weapons with them, they did not seem to harbour any ill intentions. So it is just a misunderstanding, he thought. Hence, he smiled and said, "There are no tables and chairs on the peak of the Skyscraping Cliff, so I am afraid that I am a poor host to my honoured guests. Please sit down anywhere you wish. Physician Bei, from whom did you hear that I have travelled with Clan-Leader Shi before? Your clan has such an abundance of capable people that it can be considered a complete gathering of the heroic and the virtuous. Thus, it is natural that Clan-Leader Shi is an amazing hero himself. As for me, I am but a wild crane among the drifting clouds. I live in seclusion on this barren cliff, so how could I have been deserving of a friendship that comes from Clan-Leader Shi's humble lowering of himself? *Hei hei* This is funny, very funny indeed!"

Bei Haishi raised his right hand and said, "Brothers, we will sit down and talk." It was clear that he was the leader of the group, for the remaining eight men sat down at once. Some of them sat on rocks, while others sat on tree branches that grew in a horizontal manner. Bei Haishi found a seat on a mound of earth. Yet, as

they sat, the nine maintained their positions around Xie Yanke, enclosing him in a circle.

Anger rose in Xie Yanke: You are extremely rude to treat me in this way. I do not know where your Clan-Leader 'Shi' (rock) or Clan-Leader 'Wa' (tile) is, but even if I do, I will not tell you regardless of any intentions to do so earlier. Thus, he smiled coldly and looked up at the sun on the top of his head in outright disregard of the men around him.

Bei Haishi thought: With my reputation and status in the martial arts circle, you have indeed gone too far with your arrogance towards me! But as far as I know, this man is highly skilled in martial arts. He is also cruel and ruthless, so it is unnecessary for the Clan of Eternal Happiness to incur his hatred. With due respect to our Clan-Leader, I will just yield to him. So he said politely: "Mr Xie, this should actually be an internal matter of our clan, hence I apologise for bringing trouble unto your respected self. Please present us to our Clan-Leader, Mr Xie. After that, the brothers will offer you their apologies again."

At this point, his eight companions thought: Physician Bei is being very courteous to that man. This is a seldom-seen occurrence indeed. Regardless of how highly-skilled in martial arts Xie Yanke is, what is there to fear if the nine of us attack him simultaneously? But since he is a friend of our Clan-Leader, we cannot offend him just like that.

Xie Yanke spoke up in a cold voice: "Physician Bei, you are an exceptional man with an established name in the jianghu. The words that you speak are like a horse whipped -- they can never go backwards. So you are quite an outstanding character, are you not?"

Detecting a considerable amount of anger in Xie Yanke's words, Bei Haishi went silently on alert and replied, "I am flattered."

Xie Yanke went on: "When you speak, Physician Bei, your utterances are the words of man, but when I speak, are my utterances simply the sound of breaking wind? I said that I have never seen your Clan-Leader Shi, but you certainly do not believe me. Are you the only man of noble and sincere character, thus putting me as a lowly fellow who speaks nothing but lies?"

"Mr Xie, you have made an overstatement," answered Bei Haishi after a series

of coughs. "The brothers have always admired you greatly, so there is no one from our entire clan who does not respect you for the mountain-like steadfastness of your word. How would they dare to have the slightest bit of contempt towards you? When we saw you in the midst of cultivating your supernatural skill in internal strength, we thought that you did not have the time to present us to our Clan-Leader. Thus compelled by this lack of alternatives, we decided to split up and looked around. Do not take offence, Mr Xie."

Xie Yanke's face turned green at once. "Physician Bei, not only do you doubt my words," he said, "do you even want to act in wanton disregard and recklessness on the Skyscraping Cliff?"

"I would not dare, I would not dare," answered Bei Haishi, shaking his head. "Now that you have mentioned it, we are actually quite ashamed. Having lost our Clan-Leader, the Clan of Eternal Happiness now needs an outsider to present its members to him. If word of this gets out, everyone in the jianghu will have a laugh at our expense. We only wish to have a look-around, so do not be so sensitive about it, Mr Xie. The peak is high and the forest is dense on the Skyscraping Cliff. It is a good place, so it is likely that our Clan-Leader Shi found his way here by accident. Since you are living in quietness and training in peace, you may have not noticed him." However, in his heart, he thought: He does not allow us to meet with our Clan-Leader, so he must be harbouring some evil designs.

Xie Yanke had thoughts of his own as well: How can their horseshit clan-leader be on my Skyscraping Cliff! These people are simply rude and unreasonable! It is obvious that the search for their clan-leader is an excuse, for what good could they be up to, coming in such an imposing manner? Going by my reputation, the Clan of Eternal Happiness must have had some preparations made before accosting me with such flippancy and impudence.

He knew that the situation had become very dangerous. Bei Haishi's 'Palm Technique of the Five Elements and the Six Directions' (Wu3 Xing1 Liu4 He2 Zhang3) was well-known in the martial arts circle, but he (Xie) was not bothered if the opponent consisted of Bei alone. However, with the addition of the eight highly skilled pugilists, things would be more difficult. Furthermore, the actual number of highly skilled pugilists who had arrived on the Skyscraping Cliff was

unknown, for they were probably hiding in the vicinity and waiting for an opportunity to strike. Then, in a flash of inspiration, Xie Yanke suddenly looked towards the north-east and uttered a soft "yi" of surprise.

The nine visitors followed his gaze and looked towards the north-east as well, prompting Xie Yanke to spring up, move towards Incense-Master Mi and reach for the sword at the latter's waist.

When Incense-Master Mi realised that there was nothing unusual in the north-east and heard the ensuing sound of wind and movement, the enemy was already beside him. His right hand shot out as fast as lightning, but Xie Yanke was faster. Moving ahead, the old man's hand touched the hilt of the sword. A *zip* sounded and the sword slid out of its sheath. A greenish light flashed before Incense-Master Mi's eyes as the area below his ribs became slightly numb. Then, a burst of acute pain shot through the middle of his back, for Xie Yanke had struck him on an acupoint with the index finger of his left hand before grabbing him on one of the shoulder blades with the five fingers of his right hand.

As it turned out, Xie Yanke's looking towards the north-east was only a ploy to distract the enemy; so was the act of seizing the sword. In his focused attempt to reach the hilt of the sword first, Incense-Master Mi had left his ribs and back unguarded. If not for that, he would not have been restrained in a single move, regardless of how lacking his pugilistic abilities were. Years ago, Xie Yanke saw in detail how Incense-Master Mi fought the Benevolent Elder and used the demon-hilted sabre to slice away the long hair on the boy's head; so he knew the man's swordplay techniques very well. Since most pugilists were likely to pay less attention to defence during swift and sudden moves of offence, Xie Yanke had taken a risk and put the theory to the test. Consequently, the risk had paid off.

"Incense-Master Mi, I have offended you," said Xie Yanke with a wan smile, as his victim's face quivered with anger. However, Mi could not move his body at all.

Bei Haishi was stunned. "Mr Xie, what do you want?" he asked. "Are you really going to stop us from looking for our Clan-Leader?"

"I am afraid that killing me will not be easy," answered Xie Yanke in an awe-inspiring manner. "At the very least, you would have to accompany the act with

a few lives of your own."

Bei Haishi laughed bitterly in response. "We do not have any conflicts or grievances with you, Mr Xie, so how can we harbour thoughts of harming you?" he replied. "Furthermore, we would only be bringing trouble upon ourselves if we decide to harm someone with amazing and astonishing pugilistic accomplishments such as yours. We are all good friends, so please release Brother Mi." He found himself admiring Xie Yanke's skills after seeing how the latter had Incense-Master Mi seized in a single move.

"All of you must leave my Skyscraping Cliff at once," said Xie Yanke. "I will release Incense-Master Mi after that, of course." With his right hand holding on to the Da Zhui acupoint in the middle of Mi's back, all he had to do was to send forth a burst of energy through the palm and have his victim's Heart Channel(1) shattered immediately.

"What is so difficult about that?" asked Bei Haishi in retort. "We may be leaving during the Wu period (between 11am and 1pm)(2) but we will be back by the Shen period (3pm-5pm)."

Xie Yanke's face darkened at once. "Physician Bei," he said, "what exactly are you looking for, following me around like a departed spirit that refuses to go away?"

"What am I looking for?" asked Bei Haishi in return. "Brothers, what are we looking for?"

The other seven visitors, who had not opened their mouths to speak, replied in unison: "We want to seek an audience with our Clan-Leader, and escort him respectfully back to our headquarters."

Xie Yanke became angry: "So despite the repeated statements on the matter, you still suspect that I have hidden your Clan-Leader away, do you not?"

"None of us dares to make any absurd inferences about the undivulged circumstances of the matter before we see our Clan-Leader," said Bei Haishi. Then, he turned to a big and tall middle-aged man and added: "Incense-Master Yun, go and look around with the other brothers. Inform me as soon as you see the grand presence of our Clan-Leader."

Incense-Master Yun, who had a pair of short worn-out silver halberds in his right hand, nodded and said, "Yes!" Then, he made an announcement in a loud voice: "Gentlemen, Mr Bei has a command. Let us go and call upon our Clan-Leader."

"Yes!" answered the remaining six visitors in unison, before all seven of them took a few steps backwards, turned around and left the forest.

Although Xie Yanke had a member of the enemy in his hands, he could see that the people from the Clan of Eternal Happiness were not bothered about Incense-Master Mi's safety at all. These people actually went ahead and did as they wished, without even half a fen (about 5%) of hesitation about pelting a rat in the midst of the dishes. They did not hold back from taking action despite the possibility of Incense-Master Mi getting harmed. The only person who remained was Bei Haishi, who was clearly keeping an eye on Xie Yanke instead of finding a way to rescue Mi. Hence, Xie Yanke thought: The news of that young man handing me the Black Steel Symbol has taken the realm of the rivers and lakes by storm. So these fellows from the Clan of Eternal Happiness are just using their search for their clan-leader as a pretext for their real intention: to kidnap the young man. Now that I have lost my first chance, the young man will certainly fall into their grasp. Then, the Clan of Eternal Happiness will have a strong advantage over me. Hmmph, who is Xie Yanke, that he would be bullied right on his doorstep?

With seven of the visitors gone, he now had a good opportunity to do some killing. So he placed his left palm on the back of Incense-Master Mi's waist and sent forth a rapid burst of internal strength. This move, known as the 'Civilian Assistant and the Military Officer' (Wen² Cheng² Wu³ Wei⁴), utilised Incense-Master Mi's body as a weapon with which to attack Bei Haishi.

Xie Yanke knew that Bei Haishi had reached a consummate level in internal strength cultivation, but because of an internal injury in middle-age that left three-tenths of his body racked with illness, Bei's pugilistic abilities were greatly reduced. The prolonged illness made a physician of Bei Haishi and earned him the title 'Physician Bei', but he was actually not a genuine doctor. As for his martial arts skills, these were still unusually formidable.

Nine years earlier, the 'Three Evils of Central Hebei' (Ji⁴ Zhong¹ San¹ Sha⁴)(3)

were killed by Bei Haishi in a single night, despite being located in three different places that were more than two hundred li (100km) apart from one another. This feat became a major incident in the martial arts circle, shocking people everywhere whenever it was mentioned. Thus, despite Bei's repeated coughs and apparent lack of vital energy, Xie Yanke did not dare to be negligent at all in his actions, using the most sinister, damaging and ruthless moves right from the start.

When Bei Haishi saw Xie's unexpected attack, he coughed and said, "Mr Xie ... but *cough cough* but why must the amiable relationship between us be harmed?" Reaching out with both palms, he pushed off towards Incense-Master Mi's chest. Suddenly, his left knee went forward and struck Incense-Master Mi on the abdomen, causing the latter to fly up and over Bei's own head. As a result, Bei's palms were now headed for Xie Yanke's chest.

This move was so amazing and strange in its variations that Xie Yanke was unable to put a name to it despite his extensive knowledge in martial arts. Thus startled, he followed through by putting his own palms out in an attempt to meet the opponent's attack head on. Suddenly, the tips of the fingers on both his palms felt as if they were being pricked by thousands upon ten thousands of sharp needles. Xie Yanke quickly exercised his internal strength with the intention of deflecting the enemy's energy ... only to find emptiness in his chest and abdomen. All the strength in his entire body had disappeared without a trace!

A thought flashed through his mind: Oh no! I had exercised my strength so much just now that eight-to nine-tenths of it had been spent without my realising it. How can I go all out against him now with my strength?

Thus, he lowered his palms at once and struck out against Bei Haishi's abdomen. Bei Haishi responded by pressing down with his right palm and blocking his opponent's move. In turn, Xie Yanke's sleeves swept out, dusting across Bei's face and torso with the 'Iron-Sleeve Skill' (Tie3 Xiu4 Gong1).

Bei Haishi thought: Although the oncoming force of the sleeve is vicious, it also reveals a measure of exhaustion. He is trying to lead me on. Hence, he dodged to the side and moved out of the way.

The name of the 'Skyscraping Resident' was not a trivial matter in the martial arts circle. When Bei Haishi saw Xie Yanke practising the 'Green Needles Clean-Palm Technique' earlier, he could tell from the exquisite movements of the palms and the richness of the internal strength that his own abilities were simply too far behind. However, due to the necessity of finding the missing Clan-Leader, he was nevertheless forced to engage Xie in a fight. Although he had subsequently discovered the ordinariness of his opponent's internal strength, he thought that it was just a ploy for deceiving him. Thus, he did not dare to show the slightest bit of neglect in his responses.

Xie Yanke withdrew both his sleeves. Uttering a *hu* in exhalation, he used the momentum created by the moving sleeves to propel himself backwards by more than a zhang (10/3 metres). At the same time, he turned his body around and raised his fists in a clasp. "If you will excuse me, we will meet again some day," he said. Although he continued to retreat urgently as he spoke, his movements remained more than natural and unrestrained in appearance. There was not the slightest hint of anxiety-driven speed at all.

Having attacked thrice without success, Xie Yanke knew that luck was not on his side that day. A formidable opponent had appeared just when he had exhausted his internal strength. So he had to pull himself away in a hasty retreat. However, this could not be considered him having lost to Bei Haishi. Although he had been forced to leave the Skyscraping Cliff, he had been able to restrain the highly-skilled Incense-Master Mi from his unfavourable position within the nine-man seige. This act alone had greatly deflated the arrogance of the Clan of Eternal Happiness. Thus, as he leapt from cliff to cliff in his descent, he had more to be happy than upset about.

Suddenly, Xie Yanke thought about the young man falling into the hands of the enemy. Since this would invariably lead to an endless array of consequences, he became very worried at once. Then, he thought: When my internal strength returns, I will go and pick on the Clan of Eternal Happiness. So long as I do not see that Gouzazhong's face, there is nothing that they can do. But if that Gouzazhong has been threatened or persuaded, he may see me and say: 'I beg you to chop off one of your own arms.' That would be terrible! When a man of noble character seeks revenge, a ten-year wait is not too late. The good thing is,

that boy is about to complete his training in the eight 'yin' and the eight 'yang' channels. Since he is not going to live much longer, I will just wait until he is dead before presenting the Clan of Eternal Happiness with some bad luck. This matter cannot be rushed, for it must be planned soundly.

Meanwhile, Bei Haishi was greatly bewildered by Xie Yanke's sudden retreat: Since he has a good relationship with Clan-Leader Shi, why did he use a life-threatening move against Incense-Master Mi? These odd factors really make things difficult to explain. Could he have ... could he have uncovered our scheme? Has he told Clan-Leader Shi about it? In the twinkle of an eye, Bei Haishi had become laden with anxiety.

After a moment's thought, he shook his head and turned towards Incense-Master Mi. Holding Mi upright, he placed his palms on the Hun Men and Po Hu acupoints in the middle of the man's back, and sent forth a stream of internal strength. Within moments, Incense-Master Mi opened his eyes a little and said in a soft voice: "Thank you very much, Mr Bei, for the favour of saving my life."

"Please lie down and rest, Brother Mi," said Bei Haishi. "You must not exercise your internal strength at will."

The move 'Civilian Assistant and Military Officer' that was used by Xie Yanke earlier was meant to condemn Incense-Master Mi to death, as well as to launch a fatal attack against Bei Haishi. If Bei had deflected the move by pushing off against Mi's body with his palms, Mi would have died between the two opposing bursts of internal strength. However, Bei had actually used his left knee to strike Mi in the abdomen and send him behind his own body. At the same time, the move had enabled him to disperse more than half of the force that came from Xie. Fortunately, Xie had been down to only a tenth of his internal strength, or Mi would not have survived despite Bei's utilisation of the exquisite move.

Bei Haishi laid Incense-Master Mi gently on the ground as he continued to massage the latter's chest and abdomen with his internal strength. Suddenly, loud and happy shouts were heard: "The Clan-Leader is over here, the Clan-Leader is over here!"

Delighted, Bei Haishi said, "Brother Mi, since you are already out of danger, I will go and see our Clan-Leader." Running quickly towards the happy shouts, he

thought: Thank the Heaven and the Earth. If we are unable to find our Clan-Leader, I am afraid the clan will disband like clouds that are blown by the wind. Who then will stand before us in the face of the great misfortune that has reached our brows?

Less than a li (500 metres) later, he came upon a figure seated on a large boulder. Looking at the figure's profile, he became awed, for the latter was the leader of the clan, Shi Potian.

Incense-Master Yun and his six companions stood respectfully in front of the boulder, their hands by their sides.

Bei Haishi rushed forward. At the time, the sun was shining down directly on the top of his head, so he could clearly see the facial features of the figure on the boulder. With thick eyebrows, big eyes and an angular face, who could it be other than Clan-Leader Shi? Hence, Bei called out in delight: "Clan-Leader, are you well?"

As soon as the greeting came out of his mouth, he saw Clan-Leader Shi's face contorting in extraordinary pain. The left side of Shi's face glowed green, while the right side was totally red, as if he had drunk alcohol. As a man of rich internal strength who had developed a physician's skills due to prolonged illness, Bei Haishi could see that something was not right. Shocked, he thought: What ... what mischief is he up to? Could he be practising an advanced technique in cultivating internal strength? This is strange indeed! Hmm, Xie Yanke must have been teaching him. Oh no! We disturbed him when we gate-crashed our way up the cliff earlier. This is not good.

Suddenly, the doubts and suspicions in his heart dissipated: Our Clan-Leader has been missing for half a year, and we could not find him anywhere. As it turned out, he has been hiding quietly here and practising advanced martial arts. The higher his skills become, the more benefits he will bring to the clan, so this is a very good development indeed. Xie Yanke knew that our Clan-Leader has reached a crucial juncture in his training, of course, and any disturbances from outsiders would only serve to distract him. Thus, Xie refused to present us to him regardless of what we said or did. He had good intentions, yet we offended him. Now, I feel really apologetic for doing it. But he could have simply given us an explanation, for would we not have understood the situation? Xie Yanke has

always been known as a proud and vicious man, so our sudden presence on the cliff must have made him very unhappy. That was why he fell out with us and started to kill. Looking at the condition of our Clan-Leader, the twin energies of 'yin' and 'yang' are battling each other in his body. If the dragon and the tiger cannot come together, the slightest misstep will result in overpractising and an infatuation with power. That will be very dangerous indeed.

Without further ado, Bei Haishi gestured to his companions, indicating that they all should back away. After retreating for several tens of zhang (1 zhang = 10/3 metres), he explained the situation in a low voice. Once they understood, the men were both shocked and delighted. "Our Clan-Leader will not overpractise and develop an infatuation with power, will he?" they asked. Some of them were began to feel bad as well: "We rushed blindly up the cliff and disturbed our Clan-Leader while he was hard at work. The mess that we have created is not small indeed."

Bei Haishi said, "Incense-Master Mi has been wounded by Xie Yanke. Would one of the brothers go and look after him? I will keep watch by our Clan-Leader's side. Perhaps I may be able to lend him a hand at the critical moments. The others will stand guard here as well, but remember not shout or make any noise. If an enemy appears, get rid of him quietly. Our Clan-Leader must not be alarmed at all."

All experts in the study of martial arts, the men knew that being mentally harassed by the appearance of enemies was one of the most dangerous things that could happen during the cultivation of internal strength. Hence, they voiced their agreement and went off quickly to position themselves at key locations on the Skyscraping Cliff. There, they stood guard.

Meanwhile, Bei Haishi went quietly back to Clan-Leader Shi. Standing in front of the man, he saw the flesh on the man's face twisting. His body twitched and his mouth was opened wide, as if in a shout, but not a single sound came out. It was obvious that the energy in his body had taken a wrong turn and his life was now in danger. Greatly shocked, Bei Haishi wanted to go to the man's rescue, but he did not know the type of internal strength that the latter was cultivating. There was not even the slightest room for error in such matters of the yin and the yang, lest the struggling practitioner be sent to a faster death.

By then, Clan-Leader Shi had already torn the clothes on his body to shreds and left numerous bloody scratches on his skin. Whitish wisps of steam rose from the top of his head and hung in a cloud-like clump just above it. Bei Haishi thought: His martial arts skills are quite ordinary, and his internal strength is weak. But by the clump of steam above his head, his internal strength seems to have been cultivated to an extremely high level. How could he have made such progress within half a year?

Suddenly, a burnt smell entered Bei Haishi's nostrils. White smoke was coming out of the clothes on Clan-Leader Shi's right shoulder. This was a sign of overpractising and an indicator that death would follow in a mere twinkling of the eye.

Startled, Bei Haishi reached out and pressed the Qing Leng Yuan acupoint on Clan-Leader Shi's right elbow in an attempt to bring a temporary moment of calmness to the energy in latter's body. To his surprise, the elbow felt so icy-cold that Bei could not help but shiver involuntarily. He did not dare to exercise his own internal strength in resistance, so he withdrew his hand at once, thinking: What sort of strange internal strength technique is that? Why is half of his body chilled down to the bone, while the other is as hot as burning coal?

Thus distracted for a moment, he suddenly noticed the clan-leader curling up and rolling off the boulder. Then, the man convulsed several times before ceasing to move.

"Clan-Leader, Clan-Leader!" shouted Bei Haishi in alarm as he reached out to check if the man was still breathing. To his relief, he was, but the breathing was so shallow that it could stop at any time. With a furrowed brow and a loud whistle, Bei Haishi lifted Clan-Leader Shi and placed him upright against the boulder. Since the situation had become extremely critical, Bei sat cross-legged beside his leader and placed his left and right palms on the latter's chest and back respectively. Then, he exercised his internal strength and sent forth a stream of protective energy towards the man's Heart Channel.

Shortly after that, the other seven members of the clan appeared. When they saw their clan-leader's body shaking, as well as his complexion alternating between the reddish glow of alcoholic intoxication and the greenish pall of being frozen stiff, colour drained from their faces. Their eyes were filled with misgivings

as they turned to Bei Haishi for answers. Yet, all they saw in return were Bei's trembling body and beads of perspiration the size of soyabeans on his forehead, an obvious indication that he was putting all he had into assisting their clan-leader.

A long time passed before Bei Haishi put his hands down slowly and got to his feet. "Apparently, our Clan-Leader has been cultivating an exquisite form of internal strength," he said. "As to whether he has overpractised, I am unable to make such a diagnosis at the moment. Although I have been fortunate enough to help him overcome a difficult juncture in the training process, I cannot tell how things will be in the future. This is no small matter, so brothers, please think it over and come up with a collective plan."

The men looked at one another and thought: If you, the Physician Bei, have run out of ideas, what can we come up with? Thus, no one had anything to say.

By and by, Incense-Master Mi appeared, with someone supporting him as he walked. Leaning against a cypress tree, he said in a soft voice: "Mr ... Mr Bei, we will do as you say. Your ... your ideas are always more brilliant than ours."

Bei Haishi glanced at Clan-Leader Shi and replied: "The Four Great Clans of the Northeast (Guan1 Dong1 Si4 Da4 Men2 Pai4) have made an appointment to visit the headquarters of our clan during the Chongyang Festival(4), so we do not have much time left. Brothers, you are all well aware that the visit is crucial to the existence and honour, as well as the extinction and disgrace, of our clan. We have already obtained a clear picture of the background of the Four Great Clans of the Northeast -- a flexible whip, an iron halberd, a demon-hilted sabre and a few dozen flying daggers are insufficient to put the Clan of Eternal Happiness into a tight spot. The case of Clan-Leader Situ is an internal issue, so why would we need their involvement in it? However, it is very inappropriate for the matter to be widely known in the realm of the rivers and lakes. *cough cough* ... The real and major concern, as you all know, relates to the 'Commands of Rewards and Punishments' from the Isle of Heroes. Our Clan-Leader must accept the commands in person, or ... or we will not escape the great calamity that is upon us."

"Mr Bei is right," said Incense-Master Yun. "We know the ways of the Clan of Eternal Happiness. Our brothers are forthright men who dislike being hypocrites.

If people want to come and give us a 'Reward', there is really nothing that is worth rewarding. But when we talk about 'Punishments', the task of accounting for everything will be very difficult indeed. If we do not have a leader to take charge of the situation, I am afraid ... sigh ..."

"We must not lose any more time," said Bei Haishi. "In my opinion, we must take our Clan-Leader back to our headquarters as quickly as possible. As for his current ... current illness, I am afraid that it is not light. If Heaven stands by the good man and he recovers within the next ten days or half a month, that will be best. If not, the presence of our Clan-Leader at the headquarters will still give us a measure of confidence when we stand against our enemies. That ... that is true, is that not?"

"Mr Bei's words are very true indeed," answered the men as they nodded their heads.

"In that case, we will make some stretchers and escort both our Clan-Leader and Incense-Master Mi back to our headquarters," said Bei Haishi.

The men set to work at once, cutting down branches and twisting bark into ropes. After making two stretchers, the men had Clan-Leader Shi and Incense-Master Mi strapped securely into them, lest they slid off during the descent. Then, the eight men left the Skyscraping Cliff, taking turns to carry the stretchers among them.

+ + +

That day, the young man had cultivated his internal strength according to the techniques that Xie Yanke had taught him. As noon approached, heated energy began to fill the six yang channels in his body: the Hand Yangming Channel of the Colon, the Foot Yangming Channel of the Stomach, the Hand Taiyang Channel of the Small Intestine, the Foot Taiyang Channel of the Urinary Bladder, the Hand Shaoyang Channel of the Three Visceral Cavities and the Foot Shaoyang Channel of the Gall Bladder. The energy stream was unexpectedly difficult to control. Then, the various Taiyin, Shaoyin and Jueyin Channels suddenly became as cold as ice. The heated energy stream was terribly hot, while the icy energy stream was terribly cold. Neither could harmonise with the other.

Having practised diligently for a number of years, the young man had made

great progress in the cultivation of internal strength. With the exception of the Chong Channel and the Dai Channel, the energy streams in the eight yin and eight yang channels in his body had suddenly collided among themselves at noon that day. He endured it for less than half a shichen (about one hour) before losing consciousness. Subsequently, he had been in a hazy daze. Sometimes, he felt as if his body was being roasted in a stove, for he perspired profusely until his mouth was dry and lips were parched. Other times, he felt as if he had fallen into a pit of ice, for the blood in his entire body seemed to freeze over.

As he endured the alternating bouts of heat and coldness, he often saw vague human figures of various shapes and sizes before his eyes. A continuous stream of men and women -- sometimes ugly, sometimes handsome -- dropped by. They spoke incessantly to him, but he was unable to hear a single word. He wanted to shout out loud, but he could not make even half a sound.

Sometimes, there was a bright light before his eyes. Other times, there was only darkness. Someone seemed to feed him regularly with soup and alcohol. These liquids alternated between being sweet and delicious, and spicy and pungent, so he did not know what sort of drinks they were.

He passed an indeterminate amount of time in this confused state.

One day, he felt a slight chill on his forehead and smelt a vague fragrance with his nose. He opened his eyes slowly and saw a red candle with a flame that flickered a little. Then, he heard a clear and gentle voice whispering: "Tian-ge(5), you have regained consciousness at last!" The tone was one that was full of joy.

The young man's eyes turned towards the voice and saw that the speaker was a seventeen-or eighteen-year-old girl in a pale green shirt. She had a delicate and beautiful face that was shaped like the melon-seed. Gazing at him with a pair of clear eyes, she smiled with the corner of her mouth and asked softly, "Do you feel any discomfort anywhere?"

The young man's mind was blank. He could only remember sitting on a boulder and practising his skills before his body suddenly became icy-cold on one side and terribly hot on the other. He had been so shocked by the condition that he passed out. How then did this girl appear? He began to mutter: "I ... I ..." Then, he realised that he was lying on a soft bed with a blanket over his body. He tried

to sit up at once, but the movement caused him to feel as if ten thousand needles were pricking him simultaneously in all of his limbs and bones. The pain was so unbearable that he could not help but call out: "Ah!"

"You have just regained consciousness," said the girl, "so you must not move. Thank the Heaven and the Earth, for your little life has chosen to return." Lowering her head, she gave him a light kiss on the cheek. When she stood up again, her face had turned entirely red.

The young man did not understand that she had reacted in coyness; he only felt that she had become even more good-looking than before, so much so that there were no other words to describe her. He smiled and spoke haltingly: "Where ... where am I?"

The girl responded with a sweet smile, but before she could answer his question, footsteps were heard outside the door. Putting her left forefinger quickly against her lips in a gesture of silence, she whispered: "Someone is coming. I have to go." With a shake of her body, she somersaulted out of the room through a window.

The young man's vision blurred and the girl was gone. All he was left with were only light footsteps on the roof that went further and further away at a rapid pace. He was stumped: Who is she? Will she come and see me again?

Just then, the footsteps arrived at the door. Two coughs followed before the door opened with a creak, allowing two men to enter the room. One of the men was an elderly fellow with a sickly-looking appearance, while the other was a skinny fellow who looked rather familiar. It was as if the young man had seen him somewhere before.

When the elderly man saw the young man looking at him with his eyes wide open, the expression on his face turned immediately into delight. Rushing forward, he said, "Clan-Leader, how do you feel? You look much better today."

"What ... what did you call me?" asked the young man. "Where ... where am I?"

Worry flashed across the elderly man's face before the full expression of delight returned. "Clan-Leader, you have been seriously ill for seven or eight days," he answered with a smile. "Now that you have regained consciousness,

we would like to express our joy and offer you our congratulations. Please lie back and rest, so as to attain mental tranquility. We, your subordinates, will return tomorrow and pay you our respects." As he spoke, he placed his fingers momentarily on one of the young man's wrists, followed by another momentarily touch on the other. Then, nodding his head, he smiled and added: "Clan-Leader, your pulse is steady and rich, without any hint of danger at all. Heaven has indeed stood by the good man, bringing prosperity to everyone in our clan."

The young man was stunned. "I ... I ... am called 'Gouzazhong', not 'Clan-Leader'," he said.

The statement stumped the elderly man and his skinny companion for a moment. Then, after exchanging a glance, they said in a quiet voice: "Please rest, Clan-Leader." They took a few steps backwards, turned around and left the room.

The elderly man was none other than the 'Touch that Brings Back Life' Bei Haishi, while his skinny companion was Incense-Master Mi, Mi Hengye.

+ + +

Although Mi Hengye had been wounded by Xie Yanke's internal strength on the Skyscraping Cliff, he had been fortunate that Xie did not have much energy left at that time. With Bei Haishi's timely rescue and assistance, as well as several days of recuperation at the headquarters of the Clan of Eternal Happiness, Mi had eventually made a full recovery. However, he could not help feeling considerably depressed about the fact that he, despite his heroic reputation, had been captured by Xie in a single move.

Bei Haishi decided to give him some advice: "Brother Mi, when we think about it, it was all our fault for acting in impetuosity. On hindsight, I wished that Xie Yanke had had all nine of us restrained. Then, we would not have gotten into our Clan-Leader's way and caused him to overpractise and become infatuated with power. Since then, our Clan-Leader has been unconscious. I really cannot tell if he would ever make a full recovery. Even if his body returns to health, he will no longer be able to complete his training in this strange and amazing set of internal strength cultivation techniques that allows for the collision of the yin and the yang. If anything unfortunate happens to him, sigh, Brother Mi, you will bear the

least guilt among the nine of us, for although you had gone up to the Skyscraping Cliff with us, you had made a slip even before meeting our Clan-Leader."

"What difference does that make?" asked Mi Hengye. "If anything untoward happens to our Clan-Leader, all of us will suffer in the impending disaster. There is no difference between greater or lesser guilt in that respect."

Little did the duo know that when they visited their clan-leader in his room on the evening of the eighth day, they would find him opening his eyes to look around and opening his mouth to speak. Thus, they were comforted beyond words.

When Bei Haishi took their clan-leader's pulse, he was delighted to find it steady and rich. Hence, he did not expect the latter to make a sudden and inexplicable statement that he was not the clan-leader, but someone called 'Gouzazhong' (Bastard).

Colour drained from the faces of Bei and Mi as they gasped in astonishment. Then, they backed out of the room without daring to utter another word.

+ + +

Outside the room, Mi Hengye asked in a low voice: "What now?"

After a moment's thought, Bei Haishi replied: "Our Clan-Leader is not totally lucid at the moment, but this condition is already a victory over him being unconscious. I will do my best to provide him with treatment. Given time, he will certainly recover." He paused before adding: "The only thing is, that matter has come without warning, appearing and disappearing as it pleases; but we do not know when our Clan-Leader will recover completely from his illness."

A lengthier pause followed before Bei Haishi went on: "So long as our Clan-Leader is here, there will be someone to bear the burden even if the sky collapses to the ground." Then, patting Mi Hengye lightly on the shoulder, he smiled and said, "Brother Mi, do not worry. I will take care of everything and make the appropriate arrangements."

Meanwhile, a different scene was taking place inside the room. The young man had waited until the two visitors had left before taking in his surroundings in a

hazy daze. He found himself lying on an enormous bed that was fronted by a red-lacquered desk. Two chairs stood beside the table, with brocade pads on the seats. Looking further, he found a luxurious multi-coloured display of bouquets of flowers and piles of silk, as well as embroidered blankets and curtains that exuded a musky aroma. He felt as if he was in a soft and fragrant cave-dwelling that belonged to a supernatural being, for he could not recognise a single object in the dazzling array before him.

Heaving a long breath, he thought: I must be dreaming.

Then, he remembered the girl in green and her delightfully soft-spoken and bashful ways. He could even recall her delicate eyebrows and the lush hair by her temples. When she leapt out of the window earlier, she had left it partly open, so that did not seem to be a dream.

He stretched out his right hand in an attempt to touch his head, but as soon as he lifted the hand, his whole body felt as if it was being stabbed by needles. The pain was so bad that he could not help but call out: "Ayo!"

To his surprise, he heard someone yawning somewhere in the corner of the room. Then, a voice spoke: "Young Master, you are awake ..." The voice belonged to a girl and sounded as if she had just been aroused from sleep. Suddenly, the girl cried out in alarm: "Ah, you ... you are awake?"

A figure in a yellow shirt jumped out from the corner of the room and rushed towards the bed.

The young man thought that the girl who had leapt out of the window earlier had returned. Delighted, he focused his attention on the approaching figure, only to see that this particular girl was dressed in a short goose-yellow coat. Not only were her clothes different from the earlier visitor, her facial features were different as well. This girl had a rather round face and a pair of eyes that were opened wide. Although she was not a clear beauty like the girl in green, she seemed to have a gentler disposition that made her lovely and delightful as well.

This was the first time in the young man's entire life that he had ever spoken face-to-face with girls around his age, so it was only natural that he was unable to identify the tiny details that differentiated one girl from the other.

Then, he heard the girl say, "Young Master, you are already awake?" She

sounded startled and delighted at the same time.

"I am," answered the young man. "I ... I am not dreaming, am I?"

The girl giggled and replied, "I am afraid that you may still be dreaming." The look of amusement on her face vanished immediately after that, replaced by a stern expression that did not encourage any agitation at all. "Young Master, what orders do you have?" she asked.

"What did you call me?" asked the young man in surprise. "What Young ... Young Master?"

A hint of irritation appeared on the girl's brow. "I have told you this long ago," she said. "We are lowly people, so besides 'Young Master', what else can we address you as?"

The young man began muttering to himself: "One calls me 'Clan-Leader' ... but another calls me 'Young Master'. Who exactly am I? Why am I here?"

Softening a little, the girl answered: "Young Master, your body has not recovered, so let us not talk about these things. Do you want to eat some birds' nest?"

"Birds' nest?" asked the young man. He did not know what birds' nest was, but since he was very hungry, anything would do. Hence, he nodded in agreement.

The girl went over to the room next door and soon reappeared with a tray in her hands. On the tray was a steaming hot blue-and-white porcelain bowl that exuded a sweet fragrance. When the young man caught a whiff of the aroma, his mouth began to water. At the same time, his stomach started to growl.

The girl smiled and said, "You have had only ginseng soup for sustenance in the past seven or eight days, so you must really be hungry." Then, she brought the tray over to him.

Squinting in the candle-light, the young man saw a bowl of snow-white porridge that somehow did not look like porridge at all. Several dried rose petals floated on the surface of the 'porridge', giving out a light and refreshing fragrance.

"Is this good thing for me to eat?" asked the young man.

"Yes," answered the girl with a smile. "Why are you still acting like a polite guest?"

The young man thought: This is such a good thing ... but I do not know how much it costs. I do not have any silver, so I had better make things clear first. So he said, "I do not have any money with me, so ... so I do not have anything to pay you with."

The girl was startled. Then, she broke into a little giggle and said, "You have been gravely ill, yet your character has not changed a bit. You have only begun to speak again, but you are already so garrulous and sharp-tongued. Since you are hungry, you had better eat up fast." She moved the tray a little closer to him.

Delighted, the young man asked, "So I do not have to pay after eating?"

By then, the girl had become rather exasperated with the young man's jokes. "You do not have to pay anything," she replied with a stern face. "Are you eating it or not?"

"I am, I am!" said the young man quickly. He reached for the spoon, only to feel a stinging pain all over his body as soon as his right hand was lifted. Snorting twice, he gritted his teeth and raised his hand slowly, only to have the hand tremble without stop.

The girl's expression became cold. "Young Master, are you really in pain, or are you just pretending?" she asked.

"I am really in pain, of course," answered the young man in surprise. "Why should I pretend?"

"All right," said the girl. "Since you have been ill enough to be half-dead and barely alive, I will make an exception and feed you one more time. If you take the opportunity to go all touchy-feely in a questionable and disreputable way, I will not pay any attention to you again."

"What is 'touchy-feeling in a questionable and disreputable way'?" asked the young man.

The girl turned slightly red, glared at him out of the corner of her eye and snorted. Then, she took up the spoon, scooped some birds' nest from the bowl and sent the spoon towards his mouth. The young man was stunned, for he

did not expect that such a good person existed in the world. He opened his mouth and ate the birds' nest offered. It was sweet, fragrant and thoroughly enjoyable. The girl fed him three more spoonfuls without uttering a single word, while standing as far away from the side of the bed as she could manage and stretching her arm. She was afraid that he might suddenly attempt to violate her.

Meanwhile, the young man smacked and licked his lips as he ate. "Tasty, very tasty indeed!" he said again and again. "Sigh, I must really thank you for this."

"You had better not try to deceive me with any tricks!" the girl replied with a sneer. "Birds' nest is birds' nest. You have eaten several thousand bowls of it before, but when have you praised it as 'tasty'?"

The young man was stumped: When did I eat this kind of thing? Hence, he asked: "Is ... is this birds' nest?"

The girl replied with a snort of disgust: "So you can really act dumb." As she spoke, she took a step backwards. The expression on her face changed as she became alert and guarded.

Looking at her again, the young man noticed the short goose-yellow coat and matching trousers that she wore, as well as the two buns on her head. She had just woken up, so her hair was somewhat messy. She had not managed to put on her socks, so she stood with her bare feet in a pair of embroidered slippers. The young man had never seen a sight as beautiful as the snowy-white skin on the girl's feet, for his mother had always worn socks and never allowed him into her room. Hence, he expressed his appreciation at once: "Your ... your feet are really beautiful!"

The girl's face turned slightly red before anger took over. Putting the porcelain bowl down on the desk, she turned around, picked up the mat, blanket and pillow in the corner of the room, and walked towards the door.

The young man panicked at once: "Where ... where are you going? Are you ignoring me?" He sounded somewhat pitiful, for he seemed to be entreating her to stay.

"You were ill enough to be half-dead and barely alive," answered the girl, "but as soon as you make a small recovery, you begin talking nonsense all over again."

Where do you think I can go to? You are the master, so how can lowly people like us even talk about ignoring you?" Then, she walked out of the room.

Although she appeared to have left in anger, the young man did not know how he had offended her. He thought: One girl jumped out of the window, while the other walked out of the door. I do not understand any of the things that they have talked about at all. Sigh, I really do not know what is happening.

As he sat lost in his thoughts and staring blankly into space, he heard a series of faint footsteps. The girl had returned to the room, but she still looked angry. There was a basin in her hands.

His heart responding in delight, the young man watched as she put the basin on the desk. Then, she took a steaming hot towel out of the basin and wrung it dry. Finally, she handed the towel to the young man and said in a cold voice: "Wipe your face!"

"Yes, yes!" answered the young man. He quickly reached for the towel, but as soon as his hands moved, his body was racked with a piercing pain. Undaunted, he gritted his teeth and took the towel into his hands. When he was about to wipe his face, his hands began to tremble. The towel was still a chi (33.33 centimetres) away from his face, but it refused to move nearer regardless of what the young man did.

The girl was only half-convinced. "You pretend very well," she said in a sceptical voice. Then, taking the towel away, she added, "I can wipe your face if you want me to. But if you stretch out your hands in mischief and touch a single hair on my head, I will never enter this room again."

"I do not dare," answered the young man. "Guniang(6), you do not have to wipe my face. This piece of cloth is snowy-white, but my face is very dirty. You had better not soil the cloth."

The girl found his voice rather low. His articulation was also different from what it used to be. Furthermore, the words he spoke did not seem to match the circumstances that he was in. Hence, she could not help but become suspicious: Could this bout of illness have damaged his brain? According to the discussions of Mr Bei and the others, he had overpractised and suffered an infatuation with power while cultivating his internal strength. Consequently, he had suffered

injuries to the internal organs in his body. Mr Bei could not even tell if he would eventually escape with his life. If not, why would he speak in such an incoherent way?

Thus, she asked: "Young Master, do you remember my name?"

"You have never told me what it is," answered the young man. "So I do not know what you are called." He smiled in amusement before continuing: "I am not called 'Young Master'. I am Gouzazhong; that is what my mother calls me. Elderly Uncle says that it is an unpleasant term that is used to scold people. What are you called?"

The more the girl heard, the deeper her frown became. She thought: From the way he speaks, he does not seem to be making any frivolous jokes. He must really be confused. She could not help but feel sad. "Young Master," she asked, "do you really not recognise me? Do you really not recognise Shijian?"

"You are called Shijian?" asked the young man in return. "All right, from now on I will call you Shijian ... no, Elder Sister Shijian. My mother says that I should address older women as 'Grandma' and 'Aunt'. For those who are about my age, I should call them 'Elder Sister'."

Shijian lowered her head, only to burst suddenly into tears. "Young Master," she cried, "you ... you are not deceiving me in pretense, are you? Have you really forgotten me?"

"I do not understand what you are saying," replied the young man, shaking his head. "Elder Sister Shijian, why are you crying? Why are you unhappy? Did I offend you? When my mother is unhappy, she will hit me and scold me. You had better hit me and scold me too."

Shijian became even more upset. She picked the towel up slowly and started to wipe his face. "I am your maidservant," she said in a quiet voice. "How can I hit you and scold you? Young Master, may the Heavens bring you quick recovery. If you have really forgotten everything, what will we do?"

When she was done wiping his face, the young man saw that the snowy-white towel did not become dirty at all. He started to thank Shijian repeatedly. He did not know that she had wiped his face several times a day when he was unconscious.

Shijian spoke quietly again: "Young Master, you forgot my name, but you must still remember the other things, do you not? Like, what clan are you leading?"

The young man shook his head and replied: "I am not a clan-leader. Elderly Uncle taught me to practise martial arts. Suddenly, half my body became boiling hot, while the other half became unbearably cold. I ... I ... could not endure it any longer, so I fainted. Elder Sister Shijian, how did I get here? Did you bring me here?"

Shijian's heart ached again: In that case, he ... he really does not remember anything anymore.

"Where is Elderly Uncle?" asked the young man. "He taught me to practise martial arts according to the lines on the bodies of the clay figurines, so I want to ask him why my body became boiling hot and icy cold."

When Shijian heard him mention the 'clay figurines', she remembered something that had happened seven days earlier. At that time, a wooden box had fallen out of his shirt while she was changing his clothes. She had opened the box out of curiosity, only to find eighteen naked male figurines that were made of clay inside. She had turned red at once, for she had known her young master to be an incorrigible lecher. Hence, the unclothed figurines could not be anything good. Subsequently, she had closed the box and kept it away in a drawer. Now, she thought: Let me show him the figurines. Perhaps they will help him to remember the things that had happened before he overpractised and suffered an infatuation with power.

She opened the drawer and retrieved the box. "Are these the clay figurines?" she asked.

"Yes," answered the young man in delight. "The figurines are here, but where is Elderly Uncle? Where has Elderly Uncle gone?"

"Which elderly uncle?" asked Shijian.

"Elderly Uncle is Elderly Uncle," said the young man. "His name is called the Skyscraping Resident."

Shijian knew very little about the established figures of the martial arts circle, so she had never heard of the Skyscraping Resident Xie Yanke. "It is good that

you have regained consciousness," she said. "It does not matter if you do not remember anything in the past. Dawn has not broken, so you can sleep for a while more. Sigh, perhaps it is better that you do not remember anything in the past." After gathering his blankets, she picked up the tray and began making her way out of the room.

"Elder Sister Shijian, why is it better that I do not remember anything in the past?" asked the young man.

"The things you did in the past ...," Shijian began, only to stop abruptly and hurry out of the room.

The young man was stumped. There seemed to be no answers to all the things that were happening around him. Just then, he heard the *du du* sound of the bamboo clapper, followed by three *dang dang dang* of the gong outside the room. He did not know that it was just the watchman sounding the night-watches(7). Instead, he thought: There are actually people playing with bamboo clappers and gongs in the middle of the night.

Suddenly, the Shang Yang acupoint on the index finger of his right hand became hot. Then, a heated stream of energy began travelling up his finger, through his wrist and along his arm.

"Oh no!" said the startled young man to himself.

Then, the Yong Quan acupoint in the middle of his left sole became terribly cold. Having suffered the collision of these hot and cold energy streams many times before, he knew that each attack was very painful. When the pain reached the point of unbearability, he would simply collapse. In the past, the attacks had come when he was in a daze, but now that it had struck when he was lucid, he was profoundly disturbed.

Just then, a stream of heated energy began moving upwards on the left side of his body. At the same time, a stream of cold energy began moving downwards on the right side. Both streams were headed slowly towards his heart and lungs.

I will surely die this time! he thought.

In the past, the energy streams had either met in the abdomen or the back. But now, they were about to meet in the vital organs of the heart and the lungs.

How was he going to withstand their onslaught?

Aware of the gravity of the situation, he forced himself into a sitting position as quickly as he could. He wanted to sit cross-legged, but his legs simply refused to bend themselves. After much struggling, he thought: When Elderly Uncle learnt this skill years ago, did he suffer like this as well? Come to think of it, being able to put two sparrows on my open palm without them flying away is not really a fun thing to do. If I had known this earlier, I would not have taken up the skill.

Suddenly, a man spoke in a low voice outside his window: "Clan-Leader, your subordinate from the Hall of the Victorious Leopard (Bao4 Jie2 Tang2), Zhan Fei, has a great secret to report."

Unable to make even half a sound, the young man watched as the window opened slowly and a shadowy figure flashed across it. A man in a mottled robe had leapt into the room. Dashing forward, the visitor found the young man sitting up in bed. The sight shocked him greatly, for he had not expected to see it at all. Thus, he quickly took two steps backwards.

By then, the hot and cold streams of energy were already surging around the young man's heart and lungs. His heart was thumping so quickly that he felt it would stop at any time and cause him to die. Yet, despite the extreme pain, he was unusually lucid. He heard the man in the mottled robe announcing his name as 'Zhan Fei from the Hall of the Victorious Leopard', and saw him jump into the room through the window. He did not know what the man wanted to do, so he simply opened his eyes wide and stared at him.

When Zhan Fei realised that the young man was not reacting to his presence, he spoke in a soft voice: "Clan-Leader, I heard that you overpractised while training in martial arts. You have not been well, but now, you must be much better."

The young man's body trembled several times, but he was still unable to speak.

Zhan Fei's expression turned into delight. "Clan-Leader," he said, "you have not recovered, so you cannot to move, can you?"

Although he had been speaking softly, the unexpected noise created by his presence had already been heard by Shijian from the room next door. Walking in, the girl noticed the wicked and savage look on Zhan Fei's face at once. "What

are you doing?" she asked in surprise. "You have entered the room of the Clan-Leader without his summons. Do you want to defy your superior and start a rebellion?"

With a sudden shake of his body, Zhan Fei dashed over to Shijian and struck her on the waist with his right elbow. Then, he added another strike to her shoulder with the fingers of his right hand. Shijian sank into a chair, unable to move after her acupoints were sealed. Zhan Fei practised a form of external martial arts, so he could only restrain a person's arms and legs when he blocked their acupoints. Since he could not stop a person from speaking with his skills, he took out a handkerchief and stuffed it into Shijian's mouth. Panic gripped the girl at once, for she knew that he intended to do the clan-leader harm. Yet, she could not call out for help.

On his part, Zhan Fei remained very wary of his clan-leader. Gesturing with his palm, he said in a quiet voice: "I think it will not be difficult to kill your little maidservant with a stroke of my Iron-Sand Palm Technique (Tie3 Sha1 Zhang3)!" Then, he sent his palm towards the top of Shijian's head, thinking: If the brat has not lost his martial arts abilities, he will definitely come to her rescue.

However, when his palm was less than half a chi (1 chi = 33.33 centimetres) from Shijian's head, Zhan Fei noticed that his clan-leader remained seated and still. Delighted, he withdrew his palm at once. Turning to the young man, he grinned hideously and said, "Little thieving lecher, you have done all kinds of evil throughout your life, yet today, you will die in my hands." Then, he took two steps towards the bed and continued in a softer voice: "You do not have any strength to resist me right now, so if I kill you, I will not be acting in accordance to the ways of heroic men. But my grudge against you is as deep as the ocean, so the rules of the jianghu are no longer applicable. If you understand the code of brotherhood that is used in the realm of the rivers and lakes, you will not seduce my wife!"

Although the young man and Shijian could not move, they could hear the man's words clearly.

Why does he hold a grudge against me that is as deep as the ocean? the young man asked himself. And what does 'seduce his wife' mean?

On the other hand, Shijian thought: Young Master does not know how much he has accumulated in terms of debts of evil passion. Today, retribution has finally come upon him. Sigh, this man is really going to kill Young Master. The thought brought Shijian so much anxiety that she struggled with all her strength to regain mobility. However, her aching arms and legs were so limp that she fell almost immediately to the ground with a thud.

Meanwhile, Zhan Fei growled ferociously at his clan-leader: "My wife lost her chastity to you. Hmmp! Do you really think that I had my eyes closed? That I was a cuckold who did not have the slightest knowledge of what was going on? Although I knew, I could not do anything against you, so I swallowed the insult and submitted to the humiliation like the mute who eats the rhizome of the Chinese goldthread (huang2 lian2) without being able to speak up about its bitterness. Little did I realise that the Heavens have eyes, for you, the little thieving lecher who has done all sorts of evil, have finally fallen into my hands." As he spoke, he positioned his feet firmly according to the Riding Stance (ma3 bu4) and took a deep breath. Then, he exercised his strength until his right arm started to creak, before sending a palm out with a *hu* towards the young man's chest.

Zhan Fei was the Incense-Master of the Hall of the Victorious Leopard, one of the five outer halls of the Clan of Eternal Happiness. He had more than twenty years of practice in the Iron-Sand Palm Technique, so the depth of power that could be produced was not something to be trifled with. He had used all his strength in striking the young man, hitting the latter right between the nipples on the Shan Zhong acupoint.

A loud crack was heard. Zhan Fei's right arm broke. He flew backwards, crashed through the window and landed outside the room. The energy channels in his body were sealed off at once, knocking him out cold.

There was a flower garden right outside the room, where members of the Clan of Eternal Happiness went on patrol. That night, the Hall of the Victorious Leopard was in charge of the patrols, so Zhan Fei could enter the private quarters of the clan-leader.

After Zhan Fei crashed through the window, he fell into a bed of rose bushes, snapping many of the plants with his weight. The noise alerted the patrolling

clan-members at once. Someone soon appeared with a flaming torch in his hand and found Zhan Fei lying completely still on the ground. Not knowing if Zhan was dead or alive, he quickly deduced that a formidable enemy had invaded the room of the clan-leader. Greatly shocked, he blew his bamboo whistle to alert his colleagues. At the same time, he pulled his sabre out and stuck his head through the broken window for a look.

The room was pitch-dark, without even so much as half a sound to be heard. The man raised the torch in his left hand so that the light would shine into the room, while waving the sabre in his right hand protectively in front of his chest. Peering through the gaps that were created by the movements of the sabre, he saw the clan-leader sitting cross-legged on the bed. A girl, who appeared to be his maidservant, was slumped on the floor in front of him. There was no one else in the room.

Just then, the clan-members who had been alerted by the whistle appeared.

Qiu Shanfeng, the Incense-Master of the Hall of the Ferocious Tiger, brandished his iron mace and asked in a loud voice: "Clan-Leader, are you safe and well?" Lifting the door-curtain, he stepped into the room and found the clan-leader shaking from head to toe.

Suddenly, a loud *wā* was heard. The clan-leader opened his mouth and threw up so much purplish blood that several bowls would have been needed to contain it. As Qiu Shanfeng dodged to the side and avoided being hit by the stinking vomit, he was both surprised and bewildered to see that the clan-leader had already left the bed and begun helping the maidservant up from the floor.

"Elder Sister Shijian, did he ... he hurt you?" asked the clan-leader, pulling out the handkerchief that had been stuffed into her mouth earlier.

Shijian took a breath as quickly as she could. "Young Master," she said, "you ... you have been hit. How ... how do you feel?" She was so alarmed by the incident that she could not speak coherently.

The young man smiled. "He struck me with his palm," he answered, "but I feel extremely comfortable."

Footsteps sounded outside the room. Moments later, many more people arrived. Bei Haishi, Mi Hengye and a few others hurried into the room, while

those who were positioned lower on the clan hierarchy waited outside the door.

"Clan-Leader, did the assassin startle you?" asked Bei Haishi as he rushed up to the bed.

"What assassin?" asked the young man, totally stumped. "I did not see any."

By then, Zhan Fei had already regained consciousness, having been given aid by one of the skilled pugilists in the clan. As he was brought into the room, he recalled the rules that the clan had laid down regarding traitors who defied their superiors and started rebellions. The punishment for individuals who engaged in such acts was the harshest of the lot, for it entailed having the perpetrators stripped naked and tied to the 'Platform of Punishment' (Xing² Tai² Shi²) in the backyard so that the ants and insects of the ground, as well as the bald eagles of the air, would bite and peck them at will. This would usually translate into eight or nine days of sheer torture before death could occur.

Despite using all his strength earlier, Zhan Fei had failed to kill the clan-leader. Instead, he had been thrown out of the room by a pure and rich stream of internal strength. His right arm broken and his body racked with internal injuries, he had hoped for a quick death. However, he soon found himself being taken into the clan-leader's room. Now, he listened to the goings-on with bated breath. As soon as the clan-leader uttered the words "send him to the Platform of Punishment, so that he may receive the Divine Punishment of Eternal Happiness (Chang² Le⁴ Tian¹ Xing²)", he would lift his head and run it into the wall at once.

"Did the assassin enter the room through the window?" asked Bei Haishi.

"I was in a hazy daze," answered the young man. "My body felt terribly uncomfortable and my heart beat so quickly that I thought I would die from it. I do not think that anyone came in."

Zhan Fei was surprised: Could he really have been so confused that he did not know I had hit him? But the girl knows that I was the one who did it, so she will eventually reveal the truth.

Sure enough, Bei Haishi reached over and pinched Shijian several times on the waist and the shoulder, using his internal strength to unblock her acupoints. "Who sealed your acupoints?" he asked.

"He did!" answered Shijian, pointing to Zhan Fei.

Bei Haishi looked at Zhan Fei and frowned.

Zhan Fei sneered in return. Just as he was about to let out a few curses before death came upon him, he suddenly heard the clan-leader say: "It was I ... I who asked him to do do."

Shijian and Zhan Fei could hardly believe their ears. They stared blankly at the young man, wondering what his words meant.

+ + +

Although the young man did not understand all the things that had occurred and were still occurring around him, he could sense that the situation had taken a very serious turn. Since the people treated him with an immense amount of respect, they would certainly deal unfavourably with Zhan Fei if they knew that he (Zhan) had restrained Shijian and struck him (the clan-leader) with the palm. Therefore, the young man told the lie in an attempt to help Zhan.

As for the reason behind his concealing the truth on behalf of Zhan, he was in fact unable to articulate even half of it. All he could sense was the extreme discontent and indignation that pushed the older man into hitting him. It was really something that the man could not control at all.

Furthermore, the hot and cold streams of energy in the young man's body had been surging in conflicting directions at that time and causing him terrible discomfort. When Zhan Fei struck, his palm had landed right on the Shan Zhong acupoint of the young man, the very centre of energy in the human body. The extraordinary power of that strike, as well as the sheer coincidence in its timing, had somehow caused the disparate yin-yang energies that had resulted from training in the eight yin and the eight yang channels to merge into one. With water and milk blended, there was no longer any separation between the cold and the hot streams of energy. Consequently, the young man's internal strength had seen an unexpected increase in power. Yet, he had absolutely no idea that this energy had thrown Zhan Fei out of the window. All he knew was that the bone-chilling cold in his body had become refreshingly cool, while the roasting heat had become pleasantly warm. There was an indescribable comfort in his limbs and bones. Then, the coolness and the warmth faded away, leaving his

entire body filled with so much pure energy that he could not help but call out loud.

When the Incense-Master of the Hall of the Ferocious Tiger Qiu Shanfeng entered the room, the young man had thrown up all the blood that had formed clots inside his body. Almost at once, his spirit had been lifted. Not only his body had become stronger and more vitalised, his mind had become more alert as well.

+ + +

Noticing Shijian's untidy clothes and hair, as well as the panicky expression on her face, Bei Haishi and the others soon guessed what was going on. They knew that their clan-leader had always been very fond of women and given to lust, so they were certain that he had had the evil thought of violating Shijian as soon as his illness took a turn for the better. Thus when Zhan Fei passed by on patrol, the clan-leader simply called him into the room and ordered him to seal Shijian's acupoints. However, Bei Haishi and the others were unable to figure out how Zhan Fei had offended the clan-leader to the point of being thrown out of the window.

By and by, they guessed that Zhan Fei had probably reacted with a little hesitation when ordered to strip Shijian naked. However, Zhan Fei's accomplishment in martial arts was way beyond that of the clan-leader, so "being thrown out of the window" was probably just Zhan Fei's way of appeasing the clan-leader's anger. After all, there was an eight or a nine to ten chance that he (Zhan) had thrown himself out by his own will.

The men could tell that Zhan Fei's injuries were not light. In addition, the thorns on the rose bushes left bloody scratches all over his head, face and arms. The men were somewhat saddened by the sight, but no one dared to comfort Zhan Fei or ask after him, for fear of incurring the clan-leader's wrath.

Everyone saw the situation before them in this way, so no one dared to mention the assassin again.

When Incense-Master Qiu Shanfeng of the Hall of the Ferocious Tiger recalled how he had just put a damper on the clan-leader's affairs, he began wondering if the clan-leader would turn against him in accusation then and there. After all,

Zhan Fei's case was an example of what the clan-leader could do to those whom he was dissatisfied with. Since it was always better to be tactful, Qiu bowed and said, "Clan-Leader, please rest. Your subordinate takes his leave."

The other men followed, leaving the room one after another.

Bei Haishi found the expression on the clan-leader's face quite unusual, so he reached a hand out in concern and said, "I will take your pulse again."

The young man offered his hand in response, allowing Bei to check his pulse.

When Bei placed two of his fingers on the young man's wrist, he suddenly felt a massive tremor running up his own arm. Half of his body went numb, while the remaining three fingers on his hand became limp. Bei's initial shock quickly gave way to delight. "Congratulations, Clan-Leader!" he declared in a loud voice. "This is a joyous occasion indeed, for you have finally mastered the divine skill that surpasses all!"

The young man was baffled. "What ... what divine skill that surpasses all?" he asked.

Thinking that the young man was unwilling to share the information, Bei Haishi did not dare to mention it again. Instead, he said, "Yes, yes ... your subordinate was uttering sheer nonsense. Clan-Leader, please do not take offence." He gave a slight bow and left the room.

With all the men gone within moments of one another, only Zhan Fei and Shijian remained.

Although Zhan Fei was seriously wounded, the men had left him in the room because no one knew how the clan-leader was going to deal with him. The clan-leader had not issued any commands, so no one had dared to take Zhan away for treatment.

The broken arm caused Zhan Fei so much pain that his forehead was dotted with cold sweat. When his hearing told him that his colleagues were already far away, he ground his teeth in anger and said, "If you want to torture me, get on with it quickly. He who is surnamed Zhan is not a true man if he begs even once for mercy."

"Why would I want to torture you?" asked the young man in surprise. "Hmm,

your arm is broken, so it must be set. Once, when A'Huang fell into a hole and broke a leg, I was the one who had it set." The young man had lived with his mother on an isolated and barren hill, so he had to do everything himself. Although he was very young then, he could grow vegetables, hunt, cook and repair the house in an orderly way. When the dog, A'Huang, broke its leg, he had it bound up with a wooden stick as a splint. More than ten days later, he had been surprised to find the leg completely healed. Thus, when he finished speaking, he began looking to the left and the right, seeking a wooden stick that he could use as a splint for Zhan Fei's arm.

"Young Master, what you are looking for?" asked Shijian.

"I am looking for a wooden stick," answered the young man.

Suddenly, Shijian took two steps forward and fell to her knees. "Young Master," she said, "I beg you to have mercy on him. You ... you deceived his wife, so he cannot be blamed for being resentful. Besides, he did not injure you. Young Master, if you really want to kill him, just do it with a stab of the sabre. Please, I beg you, do not torture him." She felt that being beaten to death with a wooden stick was a lot more painful than being killed with a single stab of the sabre, so she could not bear to see it happen.

"What do you mean 'deceived his wife'? asked the young man. "Why should I kill him? Are you saying that I am about to kill someone? How can a person be killed?" Realising that there were no wooden sticks in the room, he picked up a chair and pulled hard at one of its legs. By then, the proverbial water and fire had come together; the yin and the yang had harmonised. With the mastery of this particular set of internal strength cultivation techniques, came an amazingly high level of physical strength. The young man was completely unaware of the limits in exerting his strength, so the moment he pulled at the chair, a loud crack was heard. The leg of the chair was broken. Yet, the young man did not know that he had become stronger than before. "This chair is not firm," he muttered. "Would a person who sits on it not have a great fall? Elder Sister Shijian, what are you kneeling? Get up quickly."

Then, he walked up to Zhan Fei and said, "Do not move!"

Although Zhan Fei had spoken his stand in a tough and stubborn manner, the

sight of the young man breaking the chair with one pull told him with the latter's internal strength was indeed rich and vigorous beyond compare, just like the earlier incident when his arm was broken and his body was sent flying out of the window with one shake. Hence, Zhan Fei could not help but tremble involuntarily as he eyed the chair-leg in the young man's hand and thought: He will not hit me with the chair-leg, of course. A-yo! He must be thinking of pushing it into my mouth, down my throat and all the way to the stomach, so that I will neither die nor live!

The Clan of Eternal Happiness had many cruel forms of torture, one of which did indeed entail the pushing of a wooden stick into the offender's mouth, down his throat and all the way to the stomach. This unbearably painful punishment, which did not cause immediate death, was called 'Opening the Mouth to Laugh' (Kai1 Kou3 Xiao4).

When Zhan Fei thought about this particular type of torture, he became frightened out of his wits. Thus, when he saw the clan-leader approaching, he raised his left palm and sent it suddenly towards the latter.

Yet, the young man did not know that Zhan intended to hurt him. "Do not move, do not move!" he said, stretching out a hand to grab the man's left wrist.

Almost immediately, a tingling numbness ran through half of Zhan Fei's body and rendered him immobile.

The young man placed the chair-leg beside Zhan's broken arm. Then, he turned to the maidservant and said, "Elder Sister Shijian, do you have a belt(8) or something? Bind him up!"

"Are you really setting the bone for him?" asked Shijian, greatly surprised.

"Bone-setting is bone-setting," answered the young man with a smile. "Could there really be anything 'real' or 'false' about it? Look at how pained his expression is. How can it still be a joke?"

Although Shijian believed only half of what he said, she went off and found a belt. Returning to the two men, she glanced at the younger one before binding Zhan Fei's broken arm up in anxiety and fear.

"Wonderful!" said the young man with a smile. "You bound him up very well,

much better than what I did with A'Huang's broken leg."

Zhan Fei thought: This thieving clan-leader is excessively ruthless and sinister. I do not know what strange and new ways he will use to torture me. When he heard 'A'Huang's broken leg' being mentioned again, he could not help but ask: "Who is A'Huang?"

"A'Huang is my pet dog," answered the young man. "It is a pity that he is missing."

Zhan Fei erupted in anger at once. "A true man can be killed but not humiliated!" he roared. "Kill me if you want. Why take me as a beast?"

"No, no!" said the young man quickly. "I was just making a mention. Big Brother, do not be angry. I made a mistake, so let me apologise." He clasped his fists and raised them as he spoke.

Zhan Fei knew that the young man had a formidable level of internal strength, so he thought that the latter's apology was only a pretext for doing him harm with another energy attack. After all, the young man had always been arrogant and rude. It was already extremely rare for him to talk to his subordinates in a kind and friendly manner, so how could he be expected to offer any apologies?

Hence, Zhan Fei moved sideways to avoid the young man's clasped fists, his eyes glaring at the latter to see what vicious schemes he had up his sleeve.

"Big Brother, you are surnamed Zhan, are you not?" asked the young man. "Big Brother Zhan, please return to your quarters and rest. I, Gouzazhong, am not good with words. Do not take heart if I have offended you."

Zhan Fei was shocked: What ... what does he mean by 'I, the bastard'? Is that a new roundabout way of heaping verbal abuse on others?

As for Shijian, she thought: Young Master's mind was clear for a while, but it has become muddled again in the twinkling of an eye. Yet, she could see the young man's eyes looking straight ahead with his brows were furrowed in deep thought. Then, she threw glances at Zhan Fei in a bid to get him to leave quickly while he could.

"Young Shi, I do not need you to play up to me," said Zhan Fei in a loud voice. "So, you want to have me killed. I cannot escape anyway. Since I have already

accepted my fate a long time ago, I do not wish to live any longer. Why are you not having me killed quickly?"

"Your muddle-headedness is really funny," said the young man in amazement. "Why do I want to have you killed? When my mother told me stories, she would always say, 'Only bad people will kill others. Good people do not kill.' I am certainly not a bad person. Although you have broken your arm, you are still a big-sized man. How can I even succeed in killing you?"

By then, Shijian could no longer stop herself from interrupting the conversation. "Incense-Master Zhan, the Clan-Leader has already shown mercy to you," she said. "Why are you still not leaving?"

Zhan Fei lifted his left hand and rubbed his head: Is this little thief muddle-headed, or am I confused?

"Hurry, go!" said Shijian again, stamping her foot. "Go quickly!" Then, she pushed Zhan Fei out of the room.

The young man burst into laughter. "This man is quite interesting," he said. "He was actually convinced that I was going to have him killed, as if I was a terribly evil fellow who enjoyed killing people most."

This was the first time since serving the clan-leader that Shijian had seen him showing sudden kindness and pardoning a subordinate who offended him. Furthermore, the benefactor of his mercy was Zhan Fei, who had defied him and made an attempt at assassination -- offences that really could not be pardoned. Hence, Shijian could not help but react in delight. "You are a good man, of course," she said with a smile. "A very great and good man indeed. Only a good man would rob another of his wife and break the couple up ..." At this point, there was a tinge of bitterness in her voice. Yet, she was still not bold enough to speak without restraint before someone as impressive and powerful as her clan-leader. So, she simply clammed up.

"Are you saying that I have robbed another man of his wife?" asked the young man in surprise. "How was the robbery done? Whatever did I do it for?"

Shijian became angry and snapped: "If you are a good man, why are you still talking about such obscene things? You cannot pretend to be prim and proper even for a moment, for the tail of the fox has been revealed in the twinkling of an

eye. I say, dear Young Master, if you want to pretend to be a good man, I would appreciate it if you can do it for a while longer."

The young man did not understand her words at all. "What ... what did you say?" he asked. "I really do not understand why I robbed the man of his wife. Do teach me!" By then, he felt as if his entire body had an infinite amount of energy to give out, for his eyes were filled with a greatly-energised glow.

Shijian found his comments increasingly outrageous, so she soon became very frightened. She started stepping backwards until she reached the entrance of the room. If the clan-leader pounced on her, she would be able to run away. Yet, in reality, she knew that if he had really wanted to violate her, how could she have escaped from his clutches of evil? When such instances of danger came up in the past, she had relied entirely on the threat of suicide and the resolute refusal to accede to his demands before the chastity of her body could be preserved.

Now, seeing the violent and beast-like glow in his eyes, she did not dare to utter another word of sarcasm. As her heart thumped wildly, she spoke in a trembling voice: "Young Master, your body has not ... has not recovered in full. It is better to rest a while more."

"So I will rest a while more," said the young man. "When my body has recovered in full, what will happen then?"

Shijian's face turned totally red. As her left foot stepped through the doorway, she heard him muttering to himself: "I really do not understand anything that is happening. Sigh, you look as if you are terrified of me."

The young man grabbed the back of a chair with his hands and exerted a slight amount of pressure on it. The chair was made of red sandalwood (zi3 tan2 mu4), a very strong and hard kind of timber. Thus, no one had expected the back of the chair to snap with a loud *ke-chi* as soon as it came into contact with his internal strength.

"The things here seem to be made from flour!" said the young man in amazement.

Xie Yanke had harboured evil intentions when he taught the young man that set of high-level internal strength techniques in a disordered sequence. He had hoped that the yin and the yang energies in the young man's body would collide with each other at the point of mastery and cause the young man to die an incomparably cruel and miserable death. Then, he would not have been considered to 'place the strength of a finger' on him.

As for the young man, he had practised the techniques for several years until that day, when the yin and the yang energies began colliding with each other. He should have died without a doubt, but as luck would have it, Bei Haishi had appeared. The Physician Bei was skilled in the ways of healing. Coupled with his rich and profound level of internal strength, he had been able to protect the young man's Heart Channel on his behalf. Consequently, the young man's breathing had been temporarily sustained for a period of time.

After arriving at the headquarters of the Clan of Eternal Happiness, someone had visited the young man every night and fed him with doses of the stolen 'Liquor of Dark Ice and Blue Flame' (Xuan² Bing¹ Bi⁴ Huo³ Jiu³). Amazingly rare and valuable in the martial arts circle, the drink had suppressed the collision of the yin and yang energies in the young man's body. However, the strong and volatile properties of the herbs in the liquor had inadvertantly increased the level of the energy itself. When Zhan Fei struck the young man on the Shan Zhong acupoint, he had forced the opposing energies to harmonise, in the way that the dragon and the tiger had came together as one. At the same time, the young man was forced to throw up the poisoned blood that had accumulated in his abdomen. With water and fire blended, the two streams of pure yin and pure yang energies could no longer harm the young man's body. Instead, they had become a strange and unprecedented type of internal strength.

No one had ever dared to think of such a dangerous course in the practice of martial arts and the cultivation of internal strength. Even if Xie Yanke had a sudden change of heart in regret, or if Bei Haishi had wanted to save the young man's life with all his heart, none of them would have been bold enough to hit his chest with a hard and powerful strike of the palm.

Since this strange type of internal strength had developed through a series of accidents and misadventures that did not follow any coherent line of reasoning,

it had not reached the point of complete fusion yet. Thus, there would still be occasions when it would rush through the young man's body without direction, and force his blood to toss and turn in his veins. Consequently, there were times when he felt like vomiting and others when he simply wanted to jump around in anxiety.

Yet, the young man knew absolutely nothing about the reasons behind these manifestations. He had already been so confused in the first place, as if everything was just a dream. Now, he felt as if he was in a dream within a dream. He could no longer discern whether the happenings were real or simply hallucinations.

+ + +

Finally, Shijian spoke again. "Since you have pardoned Incense-Master Zhan, spared his life and set his bones," she said in a quiet voice, "why do you bother to curse him and call him a beast? Now that you have done it, he will once again hate you to the bone." Then, noticing the odd expression on the young man's face, the strange way in which his glowing eyes watched her, as well as the slight jumpy movements in his arms and legs, she left the room. She did not dare to remain there any longer, for the young man's body language were clear and obvious indications that he was about to pounce on her.

Definitions and/or words left (mostly) in their original form:

1. *Heart Channel* = short for the 'Hand Shaoyin Channel of the Heart'; see "Medicines, Medical Treatments and Bodily Matters" in *Facts and Figures*.
2. *Period (shi2)* = the 24-hour day is divided into 12 two-hour time periods in ancient times. Each period is given a separate name, after the Twelve Earthly Branches (di4 zhi4). See "Culture and Lifestyle" in *Facts and Figures* for more information.
3. *'Three Evils of Central Hebei' (Ji4 Zhong1 San1 Sha4)* = Ji4 is another name for the Province of Hebei.
4. *Chongyang Festival (Chong2 Yang2 Jie2)* = A festival celebrated on the 9th day of the 9th lunar month; also known as the Double-Ninth Festival. See

"Culture and Lifestyle" in Facts and Figures for more information.

5. Tian-ge = 'Ge' literally means 'elder brother'. In this context, it is used as a term of endearment and/or affection for the person named Tian.

6. Guniang (gu1 niang) = Literally means 'girl'. It is usually used as a form of address for unmarried girls and women.

7. Sounding the night-watches (qiao1 geng1 or da3 geng1) = A way of keeping time during the night. See "Culture and Lifestyle" in Facts and Figures for more information.

8. Belt (dai4 zi3) = In those days, the most common belts were simply long and narrow strips of fabric.

Chapter 5 - Ding Ding Dang Dang

The poplars and the willows grew so densely by the water's edge that they almost hid the small bridge from view. The little boat stopped under the bridge, which seemed like a small house that Nature built. Ding Dang went into the cabin, and brought out two sets of cups and chopsticks as well as a pot of wine. Then, she brought out a few plates of peanuts, broadbeans and dried meat, before placing everything in front of Shi Potian.

The young man was perplexed. "How strange!" he said, scratching his head. "How strange indeed!" When his eyes fell on the box of clay figurines on the table, he said to himself: "The clay people are here, so I am not dreaming."

He opened the cover of the box and took a figurine out. Having just had an unprecedented level of internal energy come to complete formation in his body, he was not aware that he had become very strong. Neither did he know how to control his strength. Thus, when he pressed the figurine gently -- as he had often done before -- a series of cracking sounds was heard. A moment later, some of the powdered colour-washes, oil-based paints and layers of clay on the figurine crumbled away one after another.

"A-yo!" said the young man, as he began to feel sorry about damaging the figurine. Then, he noticed that there was a layer of lacquered wood where the paint and clay had crumbled away. Since the outer layers had come off, he simply went ahead and peeled more of it away. When a vague human-like shape started to appear, he removed all of the clay and found a naked wooden figurine in his hands.

Varnished with a layer of tung oil (tong2 you2)(1), the wooden figurine had black lines painted all over it. However, there were no indications of acupoints on it at all. The figurine was exquisitely carved, with a life-like face and an open mouth as if in laughter. Its hands were placed on its stomach, completing the overall appearance of great mirth. It did not look at all like the clay figurine that it once was.

The young man was delighted: So there are wooden figurines inside the clay people. I wonder what the other figurines look like.

Having memorised the acupoints and channels on the clay figurines a long time ago, he simply went ahead and peeled the powdered colour-washes, oil-based paints and clay layers away from the remaining figurines. Sure enough, each clay figurine had a wooden one inside, all of which had different expressions that ranged from unbridled joy to bitter tears and from great mouth-splitting anger to utter heart-warming kindness. Furthermore, the channels shown on the wooden figurines for the exercising of one's energy were totally different from those on the clay people.

The young man thought: Since these wooden figurines are so interesting, I will practise my internal strength according to the lines on their bodies and see what happens next. But I will not follow the one with the crying face, for does he not look ugly, weeping and wailing like that? The one that is laughing with his mouth opened wide does not look good either, so I will start with this one that is smiling happily.

Without further ado, the young man sat cross-legged and placed the smiling wooden figurine in front of himself. When he exercised a little of the energy in his abdomen, he felt a stream of warmth rising slowly from it. Then, he directed the stream to the various acupoints according to the lines shown on the body of the wooden figurine.

He would never know that the lines on the bodies of these wooden figurines stood for the 'Arhats' Divine Demon-Subduing Skill' (Luo2 Han4 Fu2 Mo2 Shen2 Gong1), a set of techniques that was created by an eminent monk from an earlier generation of the Shaolin School. Every wooden figurine was an arhat in this exquisite collection that represented one of the greatest achievements in Buddhist internal strength cultivation techniques -- techniques that were extremely profound yet delicately subtle. The first step -- called 'Preserving the Heart for a Return to the Fundamentals' (She4 Xin1 Gui1 Yuan2) -- required the complete abandonment of all distracting thoughts, something that a single person in a hundred thousand men might not even be able to accomplish.

While intelligent and quick-witted people often had too many deliberations to succeed in practising this set of techniques, the dull ones were simply unable to figure out the variations that numbered in the thousands and ten-thousands.

The eminent monk who developed this set of techniques years ago knew that

talented individuals who were intelligent, yet honest and simple, were very rare. Although there were monks who had high intellectual capacity as well as a level of spiritual cultivation that was devoid of material desires, practising this set of techniques would inevitably lead them to a whole-hearted embrace of martial arts and the eventual destruction of their Buddhist testimony.

The teachings of Buddha named 'greed', 'anger' and 'infatuation' as the Three Poisons. Money-or lust-induced greed was nevertheless still greed, and if it could bring delight to the practitioner of Buddhism, martial arts would certainly become another form of greed. Therefore, the wooden arhats were covered with layers of clay and powdered paint-washes, before they were painted with the genuine entry-level techniques for the cultivation of internal strength according to the Shaolin School. Consequently, this served to prevent later generations from over-rating their abilities at the sight of the wooden arhats and embarking on a futile training course that would either cause them to lose their lives or lead them away from the true path of Buddhism.

Knowing that the eighteen clay figurines were unusual treasures of the martial arts circle, the Benevolent Elder had put in all his effort into obtaining them. Yet, he soon saw that the internal strength cultivation techniques drawn on them were ordinary and unremarkable. Subsequently, he spent many months and years studying the figurines intensively, but he was unable to find anything that made them valuable. Since he did not doubt their value as unusual treasures, he was very careful in handling them, lest they were damaged. But without destroying the clay figurines, the wooden arhats would never emerge. Thus, the Benevolent Elder never understood the secret of the figurines until the day he died.

In fact, the Benevolent Elder was not the only one who failed to uncover the arhats. Since the days of the eminent Shaolin monk, the set of clay figurines had passed through the hands of eleven people. Each of these individuals handled the figurines with fear and trepidation, thinking deeply and making great efforts to protect them. These eleven eventually died in regret, taking one of the biggest doubts in their hearts into the yellow earth with them.

The young man was naturally gifted with intelligence. Tender in age and having lived all his life in the remote mountains without any understanding of the affairs

of the world around him, he simply could not be dishonest and complex in character. Thus, by sheer coincidence, he turned out to be just the right candidate for this set of techniques.

In addition, he was also fortunate to discover the secret of the arhats on the same day that his mind had cleared. If he had not, he would soon be imperceptibly influenced by the sights and sounds of being a clan-leader for an extended period of time. As a naturally kind person, he would probably not be too affected by the killings and the fights, but he would certainly have many more thoughts and deliberations on his mind. Finding the eighteen wooden arhats then and practising the techniques shown on them would not only prove unbeneficial, but thoroughly dangerous as well.

With the fire and water in his body blended, and the yin and the yang harmonised, the young man had already possessed a very rich and profound level of internal strength. When he exercised this strength according to the lines on the body of the wooden arhat, all the blocked channels in his body began to open up. After doing the same exercise three times, the young man closed his eyes and repeated it again without looking at the figurine. A feeling of immense comfort came over him. Then, he started working with another figurine.

He became totally absorbed in the task after that, working with one figurine after another without hearing or seeing anything that took place around him. He did this from dawn until noon, and from noon until dusk, before going on from dusk until the dawn of the next day.

Initially, Shijian had been afraid that he would violate her, so she did not go further than popping her head through the door to steal a glance. When she saw that how focused he was on his training -- laughing foolishly in one moment and frowning bitterly in the next like one who had lost his head -- she could not help but become worried. Thus, she stepped quietly into the room. Then, seeing how he trained continuously throughout the day and the night without stopping for a rest, she quickly forgot to be afraid. Instead, she became so concerned that she left the room to sleep for only one or two shichen (2 to 4 hours) before returning for another look.

Bei Haishi visited several times as well. Looking into the room from the outside, he saw a dense whitish cloud hovering over the young man's head. This told him

that the young man's training had once again reached a critical juncture. Hence, he ordered his subordinates to increase their efforts in standing guard outside the clan-leader's room, for no one was allowed to enter the room and disturb the clan-leader at all.

By the time the young man was finished with his practice of the Divine Demon-Subduing Skill that was recorded on the bodies of the eighteen wooden arhats, it was already the dawn of the third day. Under the first faint rays of light, the young man took a long breath before placing the wooden figurines back into their box and closing it. He felt mentally and physically invigorated, for his internal energy could now be exercised and directed at will. Yet, he did not know that he had already made a small accomplishment in the the first step of cultivating the martial arts rarity of a lifetime, the Arhats' Divine Demon-Subduing Skill.

Under ordinary circumstances, one would need at least five or six years' to several decades' worth of training before such an achievement could be made, for there was absolutely no way that it could be done within a day and a night. However, with the harmonising of the twin energies of yin and yang in his body, the young man was already equipped with the right foundations for the practice of the skill. It was as if he was a giant ten-thousand qing (approximately 66,667 hectares) lake that had soaked up an immeasurable amount of water upstream; the Arhats' Divine Demon-Subduing Skill served only to direct that immense volume into the right flow.

As the saying went, when water came, a channel would be formed. The pure yin and yang energies that he had practised diligently for many years were akin to stored-up water that had now become a flowing channel. The conditions had been ripe, and he had achieved success.

+ + +

The young man blinked ... and noticed Shijian leaning face-down against the side of his bed. She had fallen asleep. Getting off the bed, he saw that her clothes were thin and unlayered. By then, Mid-Autumn(2) was already over, and a slight chill had begun to come upon the last ten days of the eighth month. Therefore, the young man took a brocade quilt from his bed and had it placed lightly over Shijian's body.

Then, walking over to the window, he was struck by the refreshing flower-scented air that floated in.

Suddenly, Shijian started talking in a soft voice: "Young Master, Young Master, you ... you must not kill anymore!"

The young man turned around and asked: "Why do you keep calling me 'Young Master'? Why are you telling me to stop killing people?"

Although Shijian was sound asleep, her mind had not found any rest. Thus, when she heard the young man speaking, she woke up and patted her chest. "I ... I feel very frightened!" she said. Finding the bed empty, she turned around and saw the young man standing by the window. She could not help but react with surprise and delight at the same time. "Young Master, you are already awake!" she said with a smile. "Look at me, I dozed off."

When Shijian stood up, the brocade quilt on her shoulders slipped off. She turned pale with fright at once, for she thought that she had been violated by her philandering and loose-living clan-leader while she was asleep. Then, lowering her head, she realised that she was still properly dressed. As a mixture of bewilderment and suspicion gripped her, she began to stammer: "You ... I ... I ..."

The young man smiled. "You were talking in your sleep a moment ago," he said, "telling me not to kill people. Do you see me killing people in your dreams too?"

These remarks were not unfounded, so Shijian's heart became slightly calmer. Then, realising that nothing out of ordinary had happened, she asked herself: Was I wrong to accuse him? Thank the Heaven and the Earth... Finally, she spoke aloud: "Yes, I was dreaming a moment ago. I saw you holding knives in both your hands and killing indiscriminately until there were bodies strewn all over the ground. Each of these bodies was not ... not ..." At this point, her face turned red. Then, she stopped talking altogether.

The things observed during the day often became one's dreams at night. For Shijian, she had seen nothing before the young man's bed for a day and two nights except those eighteen naked wooden figurines, so she saw naked male corpses in her dream as well.

But the young man did not know about it, of course. So he asked, "Each of the bodies was not ... what?"

Shijian blushed again before saying: "Each of them was not ... not a bad person."

Subsequently, the young man said, "Elder Sister Shijian, there are many things that I do not understand. Would you explain them to me, please?"

"A-yo!" answered Shijian with a smile. "Has the serious bout of illness changed your character? You are even using titles like 'Elder' and 'Younger Sister' when you speak to lowly servants like us."

"I really do not understand why you call me 'Young Master' and talk about 'lowly servants'," said the young man. "Those elderly uncles call me 'Clan-Leader', while Big Brother Zhan says that I robbed him of his wife. What exactly is going on?"

Gazing at him for a moment, Shijian found the expression on his face very sincere. There was no trace of an intention to joke or make fun of the situation. Therefore, she said, "You have not eaten anything for a day and a night. There is some ginseng and millet porridge (ren2 shen1 xiao3 mi3 zhou1) on the stove outside. I will get you a bowl."

The mention of food caused the young man to realise how unbearably hungry he actually was. "I will go and get the porridge myself," he said. "How would I dare to bother you, Elder Sister? Where is the porridge?" After sniffing the air for a moment, he smiled and said, "I know where it is!" Then, he strode out of the room.

Beyond the young man's sleeping quarters, was yet another large room. A small charcoal stove stood in one of the corners, with a bubbling pot of millet porridge on it. The young man threw a glance at Shijian, who turned totally red at once. "A-yo!" she exclaimed. "The porridge is burnt! Young Master, please have some pastries and other light refreshments (dian3 xin1) first. I will go and make another pot of porridge at once. How terrible of me to sleep like I was dead!"

The young man laughed and said, "Burnt porridge is good too, so what is there to fear?" When he lifted the lid of the pot, a strong odour entered his nostrils.

The porridge, which amounted to about half a pot, had almost become as dry as burnt rice, yet he took a spoon, scooped some of the burnt porridge up and sent it into his mouth.

Ginseng and millet porridge was usually a little bitter in taste. Taken without sugar, the burnt mouthful had an even greater level of bitterness.

The young man frowned before swallowing the mouthful in a single gulp. Then, he stuck out his tongue and said, "How bitter!" Yet, he scooped another spoonful from the pot and sent it into his mouth. After swallowing the second mouthful, he said, "How bitter!" again.

Shijian reached out to take the spoon from the young man's hand. As she did, she turned red and said, "It is already so burnt, but you are remarkable to eat it!" By then, her fingers had touched the back of his hand, but he was unwilling to release the spoon. Consequently, a unpremeditated burst of reflexive energy went forth from the muscles on his hand and pushed Shijian's fingers away. The shocked maidservant withdrew her hand at once.

As for the young man, he went ahead and ate another spoonful of the bitter porridge without realising what had happened.

Shijian cocked her head to one side and watched as he ate like the wolf and the tiger. The expressions on his face were especially amusing, for he seemed to find the porridge bitter, fragrant and sweet at the same time. Eventually, Shijian could not help but smile. "Well, I really cannot blame you for eating like this," she said. "You must have been starved for the past few days."

The young man continued eating until the entire half-pot of porridge was gone and the bottom of the pot exposed. Although the meal was burnt, it contained high-grade aged wild ginseng (lao3 shan1 shen1) that served as a powerful supplement to health. As a result, the young man was soon alert and radiating with vitality.

When Shijian saw the reddish glow on his face, she smiled and asked, "Young Master, what martial arts have you been practising? When my finger touched the back of your hand just now, it bounced off. Your complexion has also become better-looking."

"I do not know what it is called," answered the young man. "I simply followed

the lines on the bodies of the wooden people. Elder Sister Shijian, who ... who exactly am I?"

"Have you really forgotten?" asked Shijian with a laugh. "Or are you just talking in jest?"

The young man scratched his head. Then, rather unexpectedly, he asked, "Have you seen my mother?"

"No," answered Shijian in surprise. "Young Master, I have never heard you mention that there is an Old Madame. Ah, that is it! You must be very obedient to Old Madame; that is why your character has somewhat changed in recent days." As she spoke, Shijian glanced at her clan-leader, for she was concerned that his old temper might suddenly flare up. Fortunately, nothing happened.

"My mother's words must naturally be obeyed," said the young man. Then, after a sigh, he added, "I wonder where my mother has gone."

"Thank the Heaven and the Earth," said Shijian. "There is someone in this world who can actually discipline you at last."

Suddenly, a loud voice spoke from outside the room: "Has the clan-leader awakened? His subordinate has a matter to report."

The young man was stunned, for he did not know what to say. Turning to Shijian, he whispered: "Is he talking to me?"

"Of course, he is," answered Shijian. "He says that he has something to report."

"Get him to wait," said the young man quickly. "Elder Sister Shijian, you must teach me what to do first."

Shijian took one look at her clan-leader before raising her voice and saying: "Who is it outside?"

"His subordinate, Chen Chongzhi from the Hall of the Impressive Lion," answered the visitor.

"Our Clan-Leader instructs you, Incense-Master Chen, to wait for a short while," said Shijian.

"Yes," came Chen Chongzhi's reply.

The young man beckoned towards Shijian and went into the inner quarters. "Who exactly am I?" he asked her in a whisper.

A slight frown appeared between Shijian's brows. With increasing anxiety in her heart, she replied: "You are the leader of the Clan of Eternal Happiness. Your surname is Shi; your given name is Potian."

"Shi Potian ... Shi Potian," mumbled the young man. "So I am called Shi Potian ... so my name is not Gouzazhong."

When Shijian saw the concern on his face, she comforted him and said, "Young Master, you do not need to be worried. Take your time, and you will remember everything. You are Shi Potian, Clan-Leader Shi of the Clan of Eternal Happiness; not bas- ... well, naturally not that!"

The young man, Shi Potian, whispered another two questions: "What is the Clan of Eternal Happiness? What does the clan-leader do?"

It is not easy to describe the Clan of Eternal Happiness, thought Shijian, so she said, "There are many people in the Clan of Eternal Happiness, like Mr Bei, the Incense-Master Chen outside ... they are all very capable people. You are the Clan-Leader; everyone must listen to you."

"So what should I say to them?" asked Shi Potian.

"I am a young maidservant, so what do I know?" said Shijian. "Young Master, if you cannot come to a decision, there is no harm in asking Mr Bei about it. He is the strategist of the clan and highly intelligent man."

"But Mr Bei is not here," said Shi Potian. "Elder Sister Shijian, what do you think that Incense-Master Chen wants to say to me? If he asks me something, I will certainly not be able to give him an answer. You ... you had better ask him to leave."

"I am afraid it is not very good to ask him to leave," said Shijian. "Just nod your head to whatever he says."

Shi Potian was delighted: "Well, that is not difficult."

With the matter settled, Shijian walked ahead and led Shi Potian into a small hall outside where he could receive visitors. There, they saw a very tall man

standing up suddenly from his seat. The man bowed in greeting and said, "Clan-Leader, you have recovered well! Your subordinate, Chen Chongzhi, pays his respects."

Shi Potian bowed in return and said, "Incense ... Incense-Master Chen, you have recovered well too! I also pay you my respects."

Almost at once, the expression of Chen Chongzhi's face underwent a great change. Then, the man took two steps backwards. He knew his clan-leader as an arrogant, rude and wicked fellow who loved to kill, so the act of him bowing and greeting in response to his own gesture of respect was a clear indication that the intention to kill had been aroused. The clan-leader would soon launch a cruel strike against him.

Although Chen Chongzhi was startled inwardly, he was nonetheless a highly skilled pugilist and a proud man of the greenwood who would never give in to force. So how could he be willing to wait for his death as if his hands were tied? Hence, he directed his energy towards his palms in silence, before speaking up in a serious voice: "Your subordinate wonders which rule of the clan he was violated. If the Clan-Leader wants to mete out punishment, a major ceremonial meeting must be convened and the violation declared before all who are present."

Shi Potian did not understand his words at all. "Punishment?" he said in surprise. "What punishment? Incense-Master Chen, are you talking about punishment?"

The incense-master became angry. "Chen Chongzhi is totally devoted to the clan and the Clan-Leader," he said. "I have not committed any violations, so Clan-Leader, why are you speaking words of ridicule again and again?"

Recalling Shijian's advice to first nod his head at the things he did not understand and later ask Bei Haishi about them, Shi Potian acknowledged Chen Chongzhi's outburst with a series of nods and several grunts. Then, he said, "Please sit down, Incense-Master Chen. Do not act like a guest."

"How can there be a seat for your subordinate in the presence of the Clan-Leader?" said Chen Chongzhi.

"Yes, yes!" answered Shi Potian, nodding his head again.

Standing face-to-face, the two men suddenly fell silent. One of them looked at the other, only to have the other return the gaze. Chen Chongzhi wore an expression of total guardedness that was marked by anger and fear, while Shi Potian appeared to be perplexed and at a loss. Yet, he had a warm and amiable smile.

According to the rules of the Clan of Eternal Happiness, no one was allowed to be in the room when subordinates reported secret matters to the clan-leader. Therefore, Shijian had left the hall much earlier. If she had not, she would have been able to explain to Chen Chongzhi that their Clan-Leader had just recovered from a serious bout of illness, and was therefore still rather depressed. Hence, Chen did not need to have any misgivings about the exchange.

By and by, Shi Potian noticed two bowls of tea on the table. Taking one of the bowls in his left hand, he offered the other to the visitor with his right. However, Chen Chongzhi was afraid that the tea was poisoned. He was also concerned that Shi Potian would seize the opportunity to launch an attack. Therefore, he did not dare to reach out and take the bowl. Instead, he took a step backwards.

Crash! One of the porcelain bowls fell to the ground and broke into smithereens.

"A-yo!" said Shi Potian, before smiling and adding: "I am sorry, I am sorry!" Then, he offered the bowl of tea that he had not drunk to his guest: "Here, drink this one!"

Chen Chongzhi raised his eyebrows at once: I will not escape from your evil hands, regardless of what I do. If a true man must die, so be it. Why should he be carrying his heart in his mouth? Although he knew that the clan-leader's martial arts skills were beneath his, he would never be able to flee from the dragon's pool and the tiger's den that the dangerous Clan of Happiness was often compared to. This was especially true once the clan-leader had already launched his attack. Furthermore, he would probably not last beyond ten strokes in a fight with Physician Bei, which would certainly lead to an indescribably cruel death. Hence, he took up the bowl and drunk its contents dry with a few noisy gulps. Then, placing the bowl heavily on the table, he said in a miserable voice: "Clan-Leader, because of the way that you treat your loyal subordinates, may I wish the Clan of Eternal Happiness a thousand years of permanent joy. Long live Clan-

Leader Shi!"

Shi Potian understood what 'Long live Clan-Leader Shi!' was, but he did not know that Chen Chongzhi meant it to be an ironic remark. Thus, he replied: "May Incense-Master Chen live a long life too."

To Chen Chongzhi, these words sounded once again like venom to the ears. Laughing bitterly, he thought: My life is already left with nothing but a moment, yet you wish me a lengthy life. Hence, he said in a loud voice: "Your subordinate does not know how he has offended the Clan-Leader. Since this is his lot in life, there is nothing more to talk about. I have come today to make a report: Last night, two people broke into the Hall of the Impressive Lion at our headquarters. One of them was a middle-aged man about forty; the other was a woman about twenty-seven or twenty-eight years old. They used long swords, with techniques that were similar to those of the Snow Mountain School at Lingxiao City. I led my men in an attempt to capture them, but their swordplay techniques were brilliant. Consequently, three of our brothers were killed. Eventually, we seized the woman after she was slashed in the leg, but the man escaped. Therefore, I have also come to admit my guilt in this matter."

"Hmm, so you captured the woman, but the man escaped," said Shi Potian. "I wonder what they came for. Did they steal anything?"

"The Hall of the Impressive Lion has not been relieved of any objects," answered Chen Chongzhi.

Shi Potian frowned. "The two people were really ferocious," he said. "Why did they kill three people with such ease?" Then, struck by curiosity, he said, "Incense-Master Chen, will you take me to see the woman?"

"I obey your command," answered Chen Chongzhi with a bow. As he turned and walked out of the hall, a thought flashed through his mind: The woman whom I captured has beautiful facial features. Although she is a few years older than she could have been, she is still quite attractive. If the Clan-Leader takes a fancy to her, he may just give me the antidote in a moment of delight. Then, he spoke to himself: Chen Chongzhi, Chen Chongzhi, Clan-Leader Shi's moods have never lasted long. He has also never shown any care or respect for anyone, so the Clan of Eternal Happiness is no longer a place of shelter for you. If you escape

today by sheer luck, you had better fly far and high, concealing your surname and burying your given name without ever getting involved in such troublesome matters again. But ... but to leave the clan and flee is a great offence that cannot be pardoned. The Clan of Eternal Happiness will never let me go, even if that means having to pursue me to the ends of the earth. What then can I do?

Meanwhile, Shi Potian followed Chen Chongzhi through a maze of rooms and halls, as well as two flower gardens, before arriving at a large door that was made of stone. Four men stood on either side of the door with weapons in their hands. As Shi and Chen approached, the men rushed forward and bowed in greeting. They looked respectful, yet cautious and somewhat frightened.

Chen Chongzhi gestured with his hand. Two of the guards pushed the stone door open, revealing an iron gate that was secured by a huge iron lock. Chen took a key out and opened the lock by himself. Stepping inside, he led his clan-leader down a very long corridor that was lit by large candles. Four more guards stood at the end of the corridor, before yet another iron gate. Beyond this gate was a thick stone door. Chen unlocked the door to reveal a stone-walled cell about two zhang squared (approximately 100/9 metres squared).

A woman dressed in white sat with her back towards the door, but when she heard the door open, she turned around.

Chen Chongzhi took a candlestick from the corridor and placed it on a rack by the door. When the light from the candle fell on the woman's face, Shi Potian gasped. "You are the Woman Warrior of the Icy Plum (Han2 Mei2 Nü3 Xia2), Hua Wanzi, from the Snow Mountain School," he said.

Years ago in Hou Jian Ji, Hua Wanzi had repeatedly provoked Xia Yanke with her words. At that time, Shi Potian did not understand anything that was said; neither did he know what the 'Snow Mountain School' and the 'Woman Warrior of the Icy Plum' meant. However, he had good memory, so he did not forget the words that he had heard.

Although seven or eight years had already passed since the incident in Hou Jian Ji, Hua Wanzi's facial features had not changed very much. Therefore, Shi Potian could recognise her at once. On the other hand, Shi Potian was only a little beggar with a dirt-stained face when Hua Wanzi first saw him years ago.

Therefore, it was only natural that she could not recognise the tall, healthy and luxuriously-dressed young man. "How do you know who I am?" she snapped in indignation.

"This is our Clan-Leader," answered Chen Chongzhi in a loud and rather angry voice. "You had better be more respectful in your speech." He had responded in this manner after hearing Shi Potian identify the woman's school, nickname and name as soon as he (Shi) had seen her. In his (Chen's) mind, an unexpected feeling of admiration had arisen: This young fellow is remarkable in his knowledge. He does have his abilities indeed.

Hua Wanzi was shocked, for she did not expect to meet the notorious leader of the Clan of Eternal Happiness, Shi Potian, in her prison cell. She had broken into the clan premises with her elder brother-at-arms, Geng Wanzhong, during the night to investigate the background and identity of Shi Potian. Shi Potian was commonly known as an incorrigible lecher who destroyed the chastity of many a woman, so Hua Wanzi was certain that more harm than good would befall her, now that she was in her hands. Thus, she turned her head towards the wall at once, unwilling to allow the young man a longer look at her face. As she did, the sound of rattling metal was heard, for her hands and feet were bound in cuffs and fetters.

Shi Potian's mother had mentioned these cuffs and fetters in the stories she told, but he had never seen them until that day. Therefore, he turned to Chen Chongzhi and asked: "Incense-Master Chen, those things on Hua-guniang's limbs ... are they cuffs for the hands and fetters for the feet?"

Chen Chongzhi did not know the reason behind the question, so he simply answered: "Yes."

"What crime has she committed, that she must be put in these cuffs and fetters?" asked Shi Potian again.

A light went off inside Chen Chongzhi's head: So the Clan-Leader is upset that I have offended Hua-guniang. That is why he launched a cruel attack on me just now. I must find a way to rectify the situation quickly, for it is really an injustice for a true man to lose his life because of a woman. Hence, he replied: "Yes, yes, your subordinate knows that he is wrong." Then, he took a key out of his pocket

and unlocked the cuffs and fetters on Hua Wanzi's limbs.

Free at last, Hua Wanzi became so alarmed that her hands and feet trembled. She was actually not weak in pugilistic skills. Neither was her resourcefulness, courage and insight beneath those of men of similar standing in the martial arts circle. If Shi Potian had threatened her with death, she would not have frowned. Instead, she would have denounced his wrong-doings in a calm and confident way. However, by reprimanding Incense-Master Chen for her capture, Shi Potian was obviously trying to get into her good books with intentions that would certainly be off the track.

All her life, Hua Wanzi had kept herself as pure as jade, so the thought of Shi Potian's notorious reputation sent chills down her spine. Pressing her face against the icy-cold wall of stone as if her entire life depended on it, she thought: I wonder, is he the one? All I need is a few careful looks and I will know. Yet, she did not dare to turn around and look at Shi Potian's face, regardless of the thoughts in her mind.

Meanwhile, Chen Chongzhi exercised his internal energy in silence, and found that there were no obvious ill-effects in his body from drinking the 'poisoned tea'. Therefore, he concluded that the poison was not particularly strong. His life could be saved, so he decided to take a proactive step in getting into the clan-leader's good books. "Shall we invite Hua-guniang to the Clan-Leader's room for a discussion?" he asked. "It is dark and cramped here, and there is neither tea nor wine. Honoured guests should not be seen in this place at all."

"Good!" said Shi Potian in delight. "Hua-guniang, there is birds' nest in my room. It is very tasty, so you should go and have a bowl."

"No!" said Hua Wanzi in a trembling voice. "I am not going, and I am not eating."

"It is very tasty," said Shi Potian again. "Go and have a bowl!"

"Kill me if you want to!" said Hua Wanzi angrily. "I am a descendant of the formidable Snow Mountain School, so I will never beg you for mercy. Wicked man, you are utterly shameless, for you actually have the audacity to harbour such presumptuous thoughts. I would rather run my head into the wall of this stone cell and die, than ... than go to your room."

Surprised, Shi Potian said, "You sound as if I love killing people the most. That is really strange, for how would I dare to kill you for no rhyme or reason? If you do not want to eat birds' nest, so be it. You probably prefer to eat chicken, duck, fish, meat or something. Incense-Master Chen, do we have any of those?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" answered Chen Chongzhi. "Whatever Hua-guniang wants to eat, our kitchen has, so long as it is available in the world."

Hua Wanzi responded by spitting in disgust. "I would rather die than eat anything offered by the Clan of Eternal Happiness," she said in a stern voice. "Your food would just tarnish my mouth."

"So you would prefer going out on to the streets to buy food by yourself?" asked Shi Potian. "Do you have any silver? If you do not ... Incense-Master Chen, do you have any? Can you give her some, please?"

Chen Chongzhi and Hua Wanzi responded to the questions at the same time. One of them said, "Yes, yes, I will go and get some now," while the other said, "No, no, I would rather die!"

"So you have some silver," said Shi Potian. "Incense-Master Chen tells me that your leg has been hurt. I could actually ask Mr Bei to take a look at it, but since you dislike the Clan of Eternal Happiness so much, you had better go out on to the streets and find a physician who can treat the wound. It is not good when it bleeds too much."

Hua Wanzi did not believe that Shi Potian had the intention of releasing her. Instead, she thought that he was making fun of her, just like the proverbial cat playing with the mouse. "I will never fall for your tricks, regardless of what they are!" she snapped in anger.

Greatly surprised, Shi Potian replied: "This stone room looks very much like a prison, so what fun is there here? Although I have never seen a prison before, the prisons that my mother tells of in her stories do not look different from this room. Hua-guniang, you had better go quickly."

Hua Wanzi did not know what he was getting at, for his last few sentences about his mother telling stories seemed rather inappropriate for the situation at hand. However, his intention of releasing her did not appear to be false. So, she said: "Hmmp, where is my sword? Are you returning it or not?" In her mind,

having a weapon in her hands was important: If Shi Potian makes a move to violate me, I may not be able to defeat him, but I can always turn the sword on to myself in suicide.

Chen Chongzhi looked at his Clan-Leader.

"Hua-guniang uses a sword," said Shi Potian. "Incense-Master Chen, please return the weapon to her. Is that all right?"

"Yes, yes," answered Chen Chongzhi. The sword is just outside. When the lady leaves, it will be given to her."

Knowing that it would never do to spend the rest of her life in the stone prison, Hua Wanzi decided to take each step as it came. She was also certain that she would die, so there was really nothing more to be afraid of. Hence, she stood up and strode out.

Shi and Chen followed, retracing their steps through the corridor and stone door until they left the prison altogether.

Then, Chen Chongzhi walked quickly ahead, took Hua Wanzi's sword and presented it to his Clan-Leader. He did this in an attempt to get further into the latter's good books, but Shi Potian simply took the sword and handed it to Hua Wanzi.

Concerned that Shi would seize the opportunity to launch an attack, Hua directed her energy into her arms before grabbing the sword and its sheath with a sudden two-handed move. As she did, she put her right hand on the hilt of the sword and pulled the blade out by five cun (16.65 centimetres). Then, she looked at Shi Potian's face and had a shock: It is he ... the rascal! There is no mistake!

Meanwhile, Chen Chongzhi grabbed a sabre from one of the clan-members behind him, for he was afraid that she would harm others with the sword. After all, her swordplay techniques were amazingly brilliant.

As for Shi Potian, he said, "Hua-guniang, the wound on your leg is not causing you trouble, is it? If the bone is broken, I can set it for you, just like setting A'Huang's broken leg."

This was a casual remark on the young man's part, but it sounded suspicious to Hua Wanzi, especially when she saw his eyes looking towards her leg. Turning

red, she scolded him at once: "Philandering rascal who utters obscenities!"

"What?" asked Shi Potian in surprise. "Should I not say such things? Let me take a look at your wound." He was but an innocent and artless fellow who did not have a single scheme in his heart, yet Hua Wanzi was absolutely sure that he was teasing her.

Therefore, she unsheathed the sword with loud *shua* and shouted: "You who are surnamed Shi, if you dare to take one step forward, I will fight you to the bitter end!" The tip of her sword glowed green as she aimed it directly at Shi Potian's chest.

Chen Chongzhi smiled. "Hua-guniang," he said, "my Clan-Leader is young, talented and handsome. So it is your great fortune that he has looked upon you with favour. You do not know how many young and beautiful girls have waited in vain to spend a night with him."

Hua Wanzi turned deathly pale. Then, with a highly-energised stroke called 'Dispersing the Sand of the Vast Desert' (Da4 Mo4 Fei1 Sha1), she sent the sword into Shi Potian's chest.

Although Shi Potian's internal strength was very rich and profound, he had never learnt any techniques of handling the enemy in a face-to-face fight. So when he saw Hua Wanzi's sharp blade coming right at him, he was so alarmed and confused that he turned around immediately and fled! His movements were terribly clumsy, yet amazingly quick because of his highly-refined internal strength. Therefore, he was already several zhang (1 zhang = 10/3 metres) away within the time it took to utter a single *hu*.

Hua Wanzi did not expect him to flee at all. Although his movements looked as ugly as those of a bird flapping its wings in panic, but the extent of his qinggong (qing1 gong1)(3) was clearly something that she had never seen before. The sight stunned her so much that she ended up standing dumbfounded.

As for Shi Potian, he stood and waved both his hands from afar. "Hua-guniang," he said, "I am now afraid of you. Why do you take out your sword and kill people without rhyme and reason? All right, leave if you wish, stay if you want. I ... I do not want to talk with you anymore." He guessed that there was a great and important reason behind Hua Wanzi's desire to have him killed, but

since he did not understand the crux of the matter, he had better go and ask Shijian about it first. Thus, he turned and walked away.

Hua Wanzi was even more surprised. "The one who is surnamed Shi," she said in a loud voice, "you are releasing me, are you not? Or do you have an ambush to stop me outside?"

"Why should I stop you?" asked Shi Potian in surprise, stopping and turning around. "Anyone who is careless for but a moment will be stabbed by your sword. That would be awful."

Hua Wanzi was unconvinced, for she did not really believe that he would not make things difficult for her: I will not think about his schemes at the moment. Let me just take things one step at a time. Glaring at him in anger, she thought: It is really you! And you have the audacity to be so rude to the Snow Mountain School! Then, she turned and stalked off, limping as she went. She forced herself to endure the painful wound on her leg and walk at a considerable speed because each step taken ensured a greater measure of safety from her evil captors.

Chen Chongzhi smiled. "Although the headquarters of the Clan of Eternal Happiness is not worth very much, there are still people guarding its gates," he said. "Hua-guniang, by coming and going as you please, are you taking us for wineskins and rice-bags who know only to drink and eat?"

Hua Wanzi stopped and turned around. Raising her willow-shaped eyebrows and hold her sword defensively in front of her chest, she asked, "What then would you suggest?"

"I think it is best that I escort you out," answered Chen Chongzhi with another smile.

Hua Wanzi considered the offer: I am still under his eaves, so I cannot refuse. I can only blame myself for being too impetuous in my quest and underestimating the opponent. As a result, I failed. I am afraid it will not be easy for me to break out of the headquarters of the Clan of Eternal Happiness alone. I will bear with them for now, but I will return with my elder and younger brothers-at-arms and seek redress for the humiliation that I suffered today. Thus, she said in a quiet voice: "In that case, I will have to bother you with the task."

Chen Chongzhi turned to Shi Potian and said, "Clan-Leader, your subordinate will see Hua-guniang out." Then, lowering his voice, he added: "Are you really releasing her, or do you want her recaptured once she is outside?"

"I am really sending her away, of course," answered Shi Potian in surprise. "Why should she be recaptured?"

"Yes, yes," said Chen Chongzhi, thinking: The Clan-Leader must certainly dislike her for being too old. That is why she has not found favour in his eyes. To be honest, this woman has a snowy-white and tender-looking complexion; she is actually quite palatable! Since the Clan-Leader does not like her, I do not need to be too polite towards her as well. So he turned to Hua Wanzi and said, "Let us go!"

Shi Potian was rather frightened of the sharp sword that flashed and glowed in Hua Wanzi's hands, so he did not dare to spend time talking with her. Instead, he was glad that Chen Chongzhi was willing to see her off. Hence, he returned to his room on his own. Along the way, every person whom he met moved aside with expressions that were full of respect and caution.

Reaching his destination at last, he was about to ask Shijian the reasons behind Hua Wanzi's imprisonment by Chen Chongzhi as well as her wanting to stab him with the sword when suddenly, the guards outside announced: "Mr Bei is here."

Shi Potian was delighted. Walking quickly into the hall, he said to Bei Haishi: "I encountered something strange just now, Mr Bei." Then, he recounted the incident with Hua Wanzi.

Bei Haishi nodded in acknowledgement before responding with a serious expression on his face: "Clan-Leader, your subordinate would like to beg you for a favour. Incense-Master Chen from the Hall of the Impressive Lion has always been respectful and submissive towards you. He has also contributed greatly to the clan. Therefore, please have mercy on his life."

"Mercy on his life?" asked Shi Potian in surprise. "Why should I not have mercy on his life? He is a very good man. Mr Bei, if he has been taken ill, do think of a way to save him."

Bei Haishi was delighted. Bowing deeply, he said, "Thank you very much, Clan-Leader, for your show of mercy." Then, he rushed off.

Apparently, Chen Chongzhi had gone to see Bei Haishi after sending Hua Wanzi away, requesting for the man's assistance in seeking their clan-leader's mercy and the granting of an antidote for his poisoning. Bei Haishi had turned Chen Chongzhi's eyelids over in examination and taken the latter's pulse before concluding that the poisoning was not serious. He had thought: All that is needed is a nod of the Clan-Leader's head, for it is as easy as turning one's palm to detoxify the victim. Initially, he had been quite certain that Clan-Leader Shi would not forgive Chen Chongzhi with ease, especially when the man had already been poisoned. Thus, Bei Haishi had been secretly worried, for the clan-leader had acted in such ruthlessness despite his young age. To his surprise, his request had been granted the moment he opened his mouth, enabling him to save a friend and retain a measure of strength within the clan. Clan-Leader Shi had been listening to his words and taking his advice, so he was not difficult to deal with. Therefore, the plans that he had set in place for the great event that was to come should also proceed with little unforeseen change. Hence, the delight that Bei Haishi had felt could only be imagined.

+ + +

After Bei Haishi left, Shi Potian began asking Shijian about the things around him. Soon, he learnt that he was in a place called Zhenjiang, an important crossroad between the north and the south. This was the location of the headquarters of the Clan of Eternal Happiness. He, Shi Potian, was the leader of the clan, with Three Inner Circles (Nei4 San1 Tang2) and Five Outer Halls (Wai4 Wu3 Tang2) under him. Together, they led members from various walks of life.

Populated by many highly-skilled pugilists, the clan had grown much in prosperity in recent years. The induction of highly-capable individuals like Bei Haishi as members indicated that the power and prestige of the Clan of Eternal Happiness was something not to be trifled with. As for the actual business of the Clan of Eternal Happiness in the realm of the rivers and lakes, and how it ended up in conflict with the Snow Mountain School, these were simply beyond Shijian. After all, she was only a young maidservant.

Shi Potian did not fully comprehend Shijian's explanations as well. Although he was bright, he did not have much knowledge of the world around him. Therefore, he was unable to make any connections between the information

that he had gathered and the events that he had experienced. After a moment of muttering to himself, he said, "Elder Sister Shijian, you must have gotten the wrong person. Since I am not dreaming, the clan-leader must certainly be someone else. I am only a young man from the mountains; I am not a clan-leader of any sort."

Shijian smiled. "Even if there are people whose facial features look alike," she said, "the similarity should not be as close as this. Young Master, I am afraid that you have hurt ... hurt your brain while practising martial arts recently. I will not speak further of this. Please rest, and you will remember everything in due time."

"No, no!" said Shi Potian. "There are many questionable things that I do not understand. I need to ask you about them. Elder Sister Shjian, why do you want to be a maidservant?"

Shijian's eyes turned red. "Would anyone be willing to serve as a maid?" she asked. "My parents passed away when I was a child, leaving me without anyone to depend on. Someone took me in for a few years before selling me to the Clan of Eternal Happiness. Supervisor Dou wanted me to wait on you, so here I am."

"In that case, you are actually unwilling to be a servant," said Shi Potian. "Go then, for I do not need anyone to wait on me. I can do all the chores myself."

"I do not have any kith or kin," said Shijian in an anxious voice. "Where do you want me to go? If Supervisor Dou knows that you do not want me to wait on you, he will certainly accuse me of doing a half-hearted job. He will surely beat me to death."

"I will tell him not to beat you," said Shi Potian.

"But I cannot walk away just yet, because you have not recovered from your illness," said Shijian. "Besides, so long as you do not bully me, Young Master, I am willing to serve you."

"Well, it is very good if you are unwilling to leave," said Shi Potian. "To be honest, I had hoped in my heart that you would not go. Why would I bully you? I have never bullied anyone before."

Shijian found his remarks upsetting and funny at the same time. Pursing her lips into a smile, she said, "If you put things this way, people will think that our

Great Clan-Leader Shi has really given up on evil and returned to good." To her, he seemed totally serious, without a single intention of flirting or acting in other frivolous ways. Attributing it to a momentary expression of good spirits and a deliberate display of propriety, she was nevertheless delighted.

Meanwhile, Shi Potian fell silent. Mumbling to himself, he thought: In that case, the true Clan-Leader Shi appears to be very evil and fierce, for he likes to kill people and bully those around him. That is why everyone is afraid of him. He even robbed a man of his wife, but what did he do it for? Did he want her to cook his rice and wash his clothes? What ... what exactly am I going to do now? Yes, I had better go and clarify things with Mr Bei. They have gotten the wrong person indeed.

His thoughts swung back and forth like the waves of the ocean. Sometimes, he felt that it was fun being the clan-leader, for everyone had to listen to him. Other times, he felt that it was terribly dangerous to pretend to be someone else, for when the real clan-leader returned, he would certainly be greatly angered. He might even have the imposter killed.

+ + +

Dusk fell, and the kitchen sent eight dishes of fine food to Shi Potian's room. Shijian waited on him as he ate. When he asked her to sit down and eat with him, her face turned red. She declined the invitation regardless of what he said. But her refusal did not matter much to Shi Potian, for he ate four big bowls of rice one after another with relish after that.

He chatted with Shijian after dinner, asking about this and that, as if there was nothing that he did not find novel or amazing. Soon, the sky was totally dark, but he did not seem to have any intention of releasing the maid. Concerned that her young master might suffer a relapse and start having inappropriate ideas again, Shijian took her leave, closing the door of the room as she went.

Left with nothing to do, Shi Potian sat on the bed and circulated the internal energy in his body according to the lines shown on the torsos of the eighteen wooden figurines.

Suddenly, three knocks on the window broke through the silence of the night. As Shi Potian watched with his eyes wide open, the window shutter lifted. A fair

and slender hand reached into the room and waved twice at him. When he saw the pale green sleeve around the wrist, a thought flashed through his mind. Remembering the girl with the melonseed-shaped face and greenish clothes that had come many nights ago, he leapt off the bed and ran towards the window. "Elder Sister!" he called.

"Why are you calling me 'Elder Sister'?" came the clear, melodious and somewhat slightly disgusted-sounding response. "Come out quickly!"

Shi Potian pushed the window open and climbed out. There was no one there. As he stood wondering about the strangeness of the incident, things went totally black. A pair of soft and warm hands had closed over his eyes. A moment later, he heard a giggle behind him and smelt the fragrance of orchids. Startled and delighted at the same time, he knew that the girl had come to play with him. Growing up in the barren hills, he had often felt bored and lonely, until he found companionship in his yellow dog. Thus, he was very happy that a young person had suddenly come to play with him.

Reaching backwards, he said, "Watch out, I am going to catch you." Although he was fast in his movements, the girl was even faster, slipping away with such unusual speed that he caught nothing. Then, noticing a greenish swirl of clothes among the flowers, he rushed forward and made a grab for it, only to come away with two handfuls of thorns from the rose bushes. "Ah!" he cried out in pain.

The girl poked her head out from the shade of a Chinese redbud tree (zi3 jing1, or *Cercis chinensis*) at once. Giggling softly, she said, "Do not make any noise, blockhead. Come with me, quickly!"

Shi Potian followed her without another thought.

The girl ran until she reached the foot of the wall that surrounded the compound of the Clan of Eternal Happiness. As she was about to leap over the wall, two men came running up. They had heard the noise that the girl and Shi Potian made. Brandishing a sabre and a pair of short-handled axes respectively, the men stood before the girl and shouted: "Stop! Who goes there?"

Just then, Shi Potian arrived. The two men, being clan members on patrol in the garden, stepped aside as soon as they saw the smiles on the faces of Shi Potian and the girl. Bowing, they said, "Your subordinates did not know that she

is the Clan-Leader's friend. Do forgive us for the offence." Then, they bowed slightly to the girl as a gesture of apology.

The girl responded by sticking her tongue out at them. Then, she beckoned to Shi Potian before leaping up to the top of the wall.

Shi Potian knew that he would never be able to clear such a great height regardless of how hard he tried, but the sight of the girl beckoning and the two clan-members watching with their eyes opened wide did not make it possible for him to ask for a ladder with which to scale the wall. Thus, pretending that he was not bothered by the situation, he proceeded to make the jump with both his feet. To his amazement, a burst of energy appeared beneath his soles and propelled him upwards. He did not know where this energy came from, but it sent him right over the wall on to the other side in a light and graceful-looking manner. He did not even need to stop at the top of the wall.

"Good skills!" said the two clan-members loudly in admiration, for the sight took them by surprise.

Then, a *crash* was heard on the other side of the wall, as if something heavy had fallen on to the ground. As it turned out, Shi Potian did not know how to land, so he had taken a tumble. The noise stunned the two clan-members so much that they exchanged enquiring looks. They would never know that their clan-leader had fallen flat on his back in such a clumsy manner despite the exquisite display of the qinggong that they had witnessed.

The girl, however, saw everything clearly from her high perch. Alarmed that Shi Potian was unable to get up after the fall, she quickly leapt off the wall. "Tian-ge, how are you?" she asked gently as she reached towards him. "You have not recovered from your illness, so you should not have flaunted your skills." Then, she put her hands against his rib-cage and helped him up.

The fall had indeed cause Shi Potian a lot of pain in the buttocks, but he was finally able to stand with the assistance of the girl.

By and by, the girl said, "Let us go to our old place, shall we? Are you still hurting? Can you walk?"

Although the fall was a serious one, Shi Potian's profound internal energy took the pain away within moments. So he said, "All right! I do not hurt anymore, so I

can certainly walk!"

Reaching for his right hand, the girl said, "You have not seen me for many days. Do you miss me?" She lifted her head slightly and looked into Shi Potian's eyes.

In return, the young man saw a fair and delicate face looking up at him, with a mischievous smile at the corner of its lips. The eyes on that face shone like two bright stars in the moonlight, while the fragrance of the body to which that face belonged wafted into his nostrils. His heart could not help but skip a beat. Although he did not understand a single thing about the matters of men and women, he reacted like most twenty-year-old young men would in a situation like this. Regardless of how poor their knowledge might be, these young men would naturally develop the feelings of admiration for such a beautiful girl.

After a moment of dumbfoundedness, he said, "You came to see me the other night, but you left almost immediately. I thought about you a lot."

The girl gave him a winsome smile. "You went missing for such a long time," she said. "Then, you were unconscious for many days. You do not know how anxious my heart was. I have been visiting you every evening for the past two nights. Do you not know? You seemed rather engrossed in your martial arts training, so I did not dare to call out to you. I was concerned that I might disturb your efforts in treating your injuries."

"Really?" asked Shi Potian in delight. "I did not know anything about your visits at all. Dear Elder Sister, why ... why are you so good to me?"

Suddenly, the expression on the girl's face changed. Casting his hand aside, she asked angrily: "What did you call me? I ... I should have guessed why you did not return after such a long absence. You must have been ... been out together with a bad woman. Hmmpf! You have become so used to calling her 'Dear Elder Sister' that you are using the same address on me as well!"

Shi Potian was stunned, for she had been talking and smiling in a relaxed manner only a moment ago. He could not understand why she had suddenly become unusually angry: "I ... I ..."

Unfortunately, his lack of explanation only served to make the girl angrier. Reaching out and pulling his right ear, she said, "Which slut have you been with recently? Do you address her as 'Good Elder Sister'? Speak quickly! Speak

quickly!" She tugged hard at his ear each time she uttered the words 'Speak quickly!', so she had given it three consecutive tugs by the time she was done with her three questions.

The tugs were so painful that Shi Potian shouted: "A-yo! You are so fierce. I am not playing with you anymore!"

The girl pulled even harder at his ear. "Are you thinking of casting me aside and ignoring me?" she asked. "Well, it is not so easily done. Which woman have you been with? Speak quickly!"

"I have indeed been with a woman," answered Shi Potian with a miserable face. "She sleeps in my room..."

Furious, the girl exerted so much strength into tugging Shi Potian's ear that it began to bleed. "I will go and kill her right now!" she screeched.

Shi Potian panicked. "That is Elder Sister Shijian," he said. "She cooks birds' nest, as well as ginseng-and-millet porridge for me to eat. Although the porridge was burnt and became very bitter in taste, she is still a very nice person. You ... you cannot have her killed."

By then, there were already two streams of tears rolling down the girl's cheeks, yet she suddenly stopped crying and started to smile. Spitting in disgust, she gave his ear another forceful tug. "I was wondering which 'Good Elder Sister' she was," she said. "But you were actually talking about that stinking maidservant. You liar! You are so glib-tongued that I refuse to believe you. I have been observing you through the window for the past few nights. You have been well-behaved and disciplined in the presence of that stinking maid, so there, I will consider you a good boy!"

When she reached out and touched his ear again, Shi Potian jumped with fright. He wanted to turn his head away, only to find that girl rubbing his ear gently with the palm of her hand. "Tian-ge, does it hurt?" she asked with a smile.

"Of course, it does," answered Shi Potian.

"You deserved it!" said the girl with another smile. "Who told you to deceive me? You even called me an odd-sounding 'Good Elder Sister'!"

"My mother says that it is polite to refer to others as 'Elder Sisters'," said Shi

Potian. "Have I been wrong to address you in this way?"

The girl responded by glaring at him. "When have I asked you to be polite towards me?" she asked. "All right, since you feel unjustified, I will allow you to pull my ear." She turned her head and offered her ear to the young man.

As a faint fragrance wafted from her face towards Shi Potian, he lifted his hand and fiddled a few times with her ear. Then, he shook his head and said, "I will not pull it. In that case, how should I address you?"

"How did you address me in the past?" asked the girl, feeling upset again. "Have you forgotten even my name?"

Shi Potian refocused his attention and offered a serious reply: "Guniang, I would like to tell you that you have made a mistake. I am not your Tian-ge. I am not Shi Potian; I am Gouzazhong."

The girl was stunned for a moment. Then, she put her hands on his shoulders and turned him to one side, so that the moonlight shone on his face. She gazed at him for a while before bursting into laughter: "Ha ha ha! Tian-ge, you really know how to crack a joke. You sounded so real that I had a fright, thinking that I had indeed gotten the wrong person. Let us go!" Taking his hand in hers, she walked off.

"I am not joking," said Shi Potian in alarm. "You have indeed made a mistake. Look, I do not even know your name."

The girl stopped and turned around. Taking his left hand in her right one, she smiled like a flower in bloom and said, "All right, I will let you have your way if you want to take full advantage of the situation before putting the matter to rest. My surname is Ding, and my given name is Dang. You have always called me 'Ding Ding Dang Dang'. Do you remember?" As soon as she finished talking, she turned around and started running like the wind.

Shi Potian surged forward with her, his feet stumbling as he went. He did not have any alternative except to run along with her. Initially, he found himself gasping for breath because it was very energy-consuming to keep up with the girl, but after running for a while and adjusting the energy in his body, his steps became increasingly lighter until he was moving with no effort at all.

He did not know how far he had run, but he soon saw a moon-lit body of water. They had reached the bank of a river. Ding Dang pulled at his hand and leapt lightly on to the bow of a little boat that was moored at the water's edge. As for Shi Potian, his inability to turn his internal strength into qinggong caused him to land heavily on the boat. Crash! Water splashed up the sides of the tiny vessel at once, as it shook and bobbed incessantly.

Ding Dang gasped. Then, she smiled and said, "Look at you. Do you want the bottom of the boat turned towards the sky?" She picked a bamboo pole up from the bow and pushed it gently against the bank. The little boat floated towards the centre of the river.

The moon shone its light on to the river, causing an incomplete reflection of itself to shine back from the surface of the water. When Ding Dang touched the water with the bamboo pole, the moon in the river shattered and turned into rivulets of silvery light. The little boat continued to float forward.

By and by, Shi Potian noticed that there were poplars and willows growing on both the banks of the river. There were also a few houses, but these were located far away from him and one another. As a light and pleasant fragrance wafted towards him in the stillness of the night, he found himself wondering: Did it come from the flowers on the banks? Or was it the scent of Ding Dang's body?

The little boat made a few turns along the river before entering a narrow waterway and coming to a stop under a stone bridge. Ding Dang secured the boat to the branch of a willow tree with a thick rope. This tree stood with other poplars and willows that grew densely by the water's edge, almost hiding the bridge from view. With the moonlight shining through the branches of the trees, the bridge became a small house that Nature built for the little boat.

"This place is really good," said Shi Potian in admiration. "Even if it is daytime, I am afraid most people would not even know that there is a boat here."

"Why have you waited until today to utter your praises?" Ding Dang remarked with a smile. Then, she went into the cabin, brought out a straw mat and placed the mat on the bow. Next, she brought out two sets of cups and chopsticks as well as a pot of wine. "Please sit here, and have some wine!" she said. Finally, she brought out a few plates of peanuts, broadbeans and dried meat, and set them

all in front of Shi Potian.

The young man was struck by the fragrance of the wine as Ding Dang filled out a cup with it. Xie Yanke drank once in a while, because he did not really like wine. Shi Potian would sometimes drink along with him, but the wine had always been baijiu. Thus, when he looked at the wine that Ding Dang poured, he found it glistening with a yellowish-red glow. Gulping it down in a single mouthful, he felt a sense of warmth coursing through his stomach. However, a slightly pungent and bitter aftertaste remained in his mouth.

Ding Dang laughed. "This is Nü'er Hong from Shaoxing (Shao4 Xing2 Nü3 Er2 Hong2)(4) that has been aged for twenty years," she said. "It tastes good, does it not?"

Shi Potian was about to answer when a elderly voice spoke from above them: "How can twenty-year-old Nü'er Hong from Shaoxing not taste good?"

Crash! The wine-cup in Ding Dang's hand fell on to the deck of the boat, its contents spilt all over her skirt. The cup itself rolled until it dropped into the river with a *plonk*. Colour drained from Ding Dang's beautiful face and her body began to tremble. Holding Shi Potian's hand, she whispered: "My paternal grandfather has come!"

The young man lifted his head towards the voice from above and saw a leg swinging over his head. It was clear that the visitor was sitting on the bridge with his legs sticking through the branches of the willows. If those legs hung about a chi (33.33 centimetres) lower, they would have touched Shi Potian's head.

The single swinging leg wore a white cloth sock and a type of twin-ribbed men's shoe (shuang1 liang2 xie2) that was typical of Song and Ming times. Made of purple satin and embroidered with the character 'shou' (shou4, meaning 'longevity'), the shoe, as well as the sock, were all very clean.

"That is right," said the elderly voice again. "Your paternal grandfather has come. Cursed girl, I cannot be bothered if you want to meet your lover in private, but why did you steal the twenty-year-old privet(5)-flavoured Shaoxing wine that I went through so much trouble to obtain, and serve it to your lover?"

Forcing herself to remain smiling, Ding Dang replied: "He ... he is not a lover. He is just a ... a friend, an ordinary friend."

"*Pei!*" spat the elderly man in anger and disgust. "Does an 'ordinary friend' deserve such wonderful treatment from you? Including the audacity of stealing your grandfather's lifeblood? Little Thief, come out right now and let the old man see what sort of ugly monster his grand-daughter's lover is."

Ding Dang took Shi Potian's right palm in her left hand and began writing on the palm with her right index finger. At the same time, she said, "Grandfather, this friend is foolish and ugly. You are certain to dislike him as soon as you see him. I stole the wine, yes, but it was not meant specially for him. Hmmp! He is unworthy of it. I wanted to have a drink, so I simply grabbed someone to accompany me."

However, she wrote 'You must not say that you are the leader of the Clan of Eternal Happiness' on Shi Potian's palm. Unfortunately, his mother had never taught him to read. Neither had Xie Yanke, so he could not even recognise the character for 'one' (a single horizontal stroke similar to a 'dash') if he saw it. He did not know what she was up to, touching and stroking his palm in such a disorganised way, but the ticklish feelings produced were quite fun. But when he heard her calling him 'foolish and ugly' and declaring him unworthy of drinking her wine, he could not help but feel angry. Thus, he shook her hand off without further thought.

Almost at once, Ding Dang reached out and grabbed his hand again. After writing 'Your life is in danger; you must listen to me' on his palm, she pressed it several times, as if to show affection. At the same time, the act appeared to be a warning given out in secret. Yet, Shi Potian thought that she was simply being warm and friendly. So he became quite happy without realising the truth behind her actions.

Just then, the old man above them spoke again: "Both of you had better come up here now! A'Dang, how many people has your grandfather killed today?"

"It seems like ... like you killed only one," answered Ding Dang in a trembling voice, prompting Shi Potian to think: I have run into people here and there, but why do all of them go around with the word 'kill' in their mouths?

"All right," said the old man on the bridge, "I have only killed one person today, so I can kill two more. It is not a bad idea to kill another two people to go with

my wine."

Killing people to go with wine? thought Shi Potian. This old man really knows how to joke.

Suddenly, Ding Dang's grip on his loosened. Something moved before his eyes, and a man appeared on the bow of the boat. Sporting a white beard, a mop of white hair and a pair of laughter-filled eyes beneath mottled eyebrows, the newcomer seemed to be a kindly old man. However, anyone who met the old man's gaze would be struck immediately by an involuntary shiver, for the latter's eyes exuded an indescribable terror and malice that chilled people right into the marrow of their bones.

Smiling, the old man tapped Shi Potian on the shoulder and said, "You rascal, your good fortune is certainly not insignificant, for you have drunk my twenty-year-old privet-flavoured Shaoxing wine!" The tap on the shoulder was a light one, yet Shi Potian's bones creaked loudly for quite a while, as if all those bones were about to shatter into smithereens. The sight shocked Ding Dang so much that she clung on to the old man's arm and pleaded: "Grandfather, do not ... do not injure him."

Apparently, the old man had exerted seven-tenths of his energy during that simple tap on the shoulder. This would normally have had all the bones on Shi Potian's shoulder and arm shattered. However, when the old man's palm touched the young man's shoulder, he (the old man) had actually felt a very rich and highly stable stream of internal energy coming from it. Not only had the energy stream served to protect the young man, it had also shook the old man's palm off in an upward thrust. If the old man had not responded with an immediate exertion of additional strength, his palm would have bounced away. This, in turn, would have caused him quite a bit of embarrassment there and then.

Therefore, the surprise that the old man felt was not beneath that of Ding Dang's. Yet, he smiled brightly once more and said, "Good, good. The rascal seems fit to drink my fine wine. A'Dang, fill a few cups with wine and bring them up. I will not blame you for stealing the wine because I want to invite him for a drink myself."

Ding Dang was overjoyed, for she had always known her paternal grandfather as someone who considered everyone else beneath his notice. In addition, he rarely approved of those who were known as highly-skilled pugilists in the martial arts circle. Therefore, the fact that he wanted to invite Shi Potian for a drink as soon as he saw him was indeed beyond her expectations.

Her lingering affections for Shi Potian led her to believe that he was a peerless young hero, so she was actually not amazed by her grandfather's show of favour upon him. However, she was thrilled by her grandfather's swift and sudden change of tone -- from wanting to kill the young man to inviting him for a drink -- for it was clear that even the old man fell for Darling Shi's (Shi2 Lang2)(6) handsome appearance, talent, brilliance and poise. These conclusions were, of course, nothing more than wishful thinking, for she had absolutely no idea that Shi Potian had been at the brink of great danger a moment ago.

Her grandfather had changed his attitude simply because he had discovered the astonishing extent of his opponent's internal energy, for he could not be bothered about the young man's 'handsome appearance, talent, brilliance and poise'. Furthermore, Shi Potian was not exactly handsome to begin with, although he was not ugly either. As for 'talent, brilliance and poise', these characteristics could not even be used to describe him at all.

+ + +

Feeling quite happy, Ding Dang went into the cabin of the boat and reappeared with two cups. She filled one of them with wine for her grandfather, before filling the other for Shi Potian. Finally, she filled out a cup for herself as well.

"Very good, very good indeed!" said the old man. "Boy, since you have found favour in my A'Dang's eyes, you must certainly have quite a background. What is your name?"

"I ... I ... I ...," said Shi Potian. By then, he knew that 'Gouzazhong' was a term of abuse. Used among familiar people, it would not have done much harm, but strangers would probably find it somewhat crude. Yet, he did not have another name, so he uttered "I" three times without any means to continue.

"Do you not dare to tell me your name?" asked the old man, displeased and

indignant.

"What is there to be afraid of?" Shi Potian responded in boldness. "The only thing is, my name is very unpleasant to the ear. I am called Gouzazhong."

Momentarily stunned, the old man soon burst into laughter. He laughed so loudly that his voice carried far into the distance. At the same time, his white beard flew and flapped around him in mirth. After laughing for quite a while, he said, "Good, good, good. The little boy's name is very good indeed. Bastard (Gouzazhong)!"

"Yes, Grandfather," said Shi Potian. "Did you call me for something?"

Smiling so widely that her teeth could be seen, Ding Dang looked at her grandfather and Shi Potian in turn with an expression so lovely that it could not be compared to the scenery of an autumn's day. To her, the natural way in which Shi Potian addressed her grandfather as his own meant that there was no longer any difference between the two of them. In addition, she thought: I wrote on his palm, telling him not to reveal his identity, and he actually took my advice. He is the dignified and respected leader of a clan, yet he is willing to call himself a bastard. That he would suffer such an inconvenience for my sake is indeed an extreme indication of his deep love for me.

The old man was very happy as well. "Good, good!" he said again and again. To him, Shi Potian's immediate response to the word 'Bastard' meant that he (Shi) had actually placed himself in a subservient position despite being in possession of a consummate martial arts skill. The absolute lack of stubbornness on the young man's part contributed even further to the old man's good spirits. He said, "A'Dang, you told your lover your grandfather's name a long time ago, did you not?"

"No, I have not told him about it yet," answered Ding Dang, shaking her head in bashfulness.

The old man's countenance darkened. "What exactly is going on?" he asked. "Are you really being nice to him, or is it just a farce? Why have you not told him about your identity and background? If you are taking this for a farce, why did you steal my twenty-year-old Shaoxing wine for him? Why did you take even the 'Liquor of Dark Ice and Blue Flame' that I have kept for saving lives and feed it to

the boy for several nights in a row?" His voice became increasingly stern as he spoke, reaching a peak with the words 'Liquor of Dark Ice and Blue Flame' which were uttered with pauses between them and accompanied with a terrifying glint in his eyes.

Even Shi Potian, who was watching the goings-on from the side, could not help but feel afraid and threatened.

Ding Dang turned her body sideways and tumbled into the old man's arms. "Grandfather," she begged, "since you know everything, please have mercy on A'Dang."

"Have mercy on A'Dang?" repeated the old man with a sneer. "That is easy for you to say. Do you know how effective and potent the 'Liquor of Dark Ice and Blue Flame' is? Is it not a pity that you wasted it in such carelessness?"

"I will help you find a way to re-create the drink," said Ding Dang.

"You speak as if it is a simple and trivial matter," snapped the old man. "If I can re-create it at will, I would not have placed such value on it."

"Well, his body was burning hot for moment before turning icy-cold in the next," said Ding Dang. "I remembered that your miraculous liquor could harmonise the yin and the yang, so I stole it and gave some to him. It certainly worked as I had expected, so I gave him more. Before I knew it, it was finished. Grandfather, tell A'Dang how the liquor is made. I do not care if I have to steal and rob, but I will certainly make a few bottles of it for you."

"A few bottles?" asked the old man. "Ha ha, a few bottles? You can wait until your hair turns white, but you may never find all the precious medicinal herbs that are needed just to make me a bottle or even half."

Listening to the exchange between the old man and his grand-daughter, Shi Potian eventually understood that Ding Dang had stolen her grandfather's precious 'Liquor of Dark Ice and Blue Flame' for him during the period when he was lying unconscious and suffering from the effects of the colliding hot and cold energy streams in his body. His survival could partly be attributed to the drinking of the liquor, so Ding Dang had, in effect, done him the great favour of saving his life.

As the old man became increasingly forceful in his words, Shi Potian spoke: "Grandfather, since I was the one who drank the liquor, you should come after me for its replacement. I will certainly think of a way to return the liquor to you. If I am unable to do so, I am willing to let you deal with me as you see fit. Please do not put Ding Ding Dang Dang in a spot."

"Very good, very good indeed!" said the old man with a laugh. "So you have a measure of moral integrity. In that case, there is still a little bit of meaning to this issue. A'Dang, why do you not tell him your identity?"

An expression of awkwardness appeared on Ding Dang's face. "He ... he has not asked me to," she answered, "so I have not told him anything. Grandfather, do not be suspicious. There is no other agenda in this respect."

"No other agenda?" asked the old man. "I do not think so. I am afraid that there is a big agenda behind this; in fact, it is a very big agenda indeed. Do I not know the thoughts in the little girl's heart? You have fallen whole-heartedly in love with him and hoped that he will take you as his wife. If you tell him your full identity, hmmph hmmph, you will definitely frighten this boy out of his wits. Therefore, you chose to hide the truth from him for as long as you are able. Hmmph, tell me, am I correct?"

The old man's words had described Ding Dang's thoughts without mistake. A highly-skilled pugilist who killed people without batting an eyelid, the old man struck fear in the hearts of the people in the realm of the rivers and lakes by his name alone. These people regarded him from a respectful distance, for they were unwilling to have any relationships with him. Yet, he wanted others to show affection for him. However, if anyone showed the slightest bit of fear or disgust, he would have him killed at once.

Ding Dang felt embarrassed, for her grandfather had shown that he knew exactly what was going on in her heart a long time ago. If she lied there and then, she would just infuriate him and allow the issue to get totally out of hand. But if she revealed her grandfather's name, there was a nineteen to one chance that Darling Shi would become so frightened that he would never dare to see her again. How could that be good?

Almost at once, she was struck by both anxiety and fear. She was afraid that

her grandfather would kill Darling Shi in a fit of anger, and worried that her lingering affections would flow away like water once her lover knew her identity. It did not matter if Darling Shi died or left, for she did not feel like living any longer. Hence, she said in a trembling voice: "Grandfather, I ... I ..."

The old man laughed loudly. "You are concerned that people would despise us, are you not?" he asked. "Ha ha, Old Man Ding shakes the realm of the rivers and lakes with his impressiveness, but my grand-daughter does not have the courage to utter her grandfather's name. Not only does she not consider her grandfather as her honour, but she even views him as her shame. Ha ha, what an extreme joke!" He put his hands on his belly and laughed with complete ease of mind.

Ding Dang knew that a great crisis had come upon them there and then. Her grandfather had always placed great value on the 'Liquor of Dark Ice and Blue Flame', but she had stolen it to save Darling Shi's life without daring to mention the old man's name. Therefore, his loud laughter was really an indication that his anger had reached its limits. Therefore, she bit her lips and said, "Tian-ge, my grandfather is surnamed Ding."

"Yes, you are surnamed Ding, and your grandfather is surnamed Ding as well," said Shi Potian. "Everyone is surnamed Ding. Ding Ding Ding ... that is quite pleasant to the ear."

Ding Dang continued: "His given name consists of the characters 'Bu' and 'San'. His nickname is ... is ... 'Not More Than Three A Day'!" She thought that as soon as the words 'Not More Than Three A Day, Ding Busan' came out of her mouth, Shi Potian would be greatly alarmed, so she fixed her eyes on him as her heart thumped wildly.

To her surprise, Shi Potian did not seem affected at all. Smiling a little, he said, "Grandfather's nickname sounds very nice indeed."

Ding Dang's heart skipped a beat before it was overcome with great joy. However, she was still concerned, for she was afraid that he was speaking in irony. "Why do you say that it sounds very nice?" she asked.

"I cannot really tell you why," answered Shi Potian. "It just feels very nice. 'Not More Than Three A Day' ... that is very interesting indeed."

Glancing at her grandfather out of the corner of her eye, Ding Dang saw him

stroking his beard in delight. Then, he reached out and gave Shi Potian another tap on the shoulder. This time, however, the tap did not come with an exertion of internal strength. Shaking his head, the old man said, "You are the friend who knows me best (zhi1 ji3). That is very good. People who hear the name of 'Not More Than Three A Day' would either sing my praises in a despicable attempt to get into my good books, or shrink timidly away in sheer terror. A few impulsive ones would point their fingers at me and utter angry curses, but you are the only one who has remained calm and collected. In fact, you even say that my nickname is pleasant to the ear. That is very good, little boy. I will give you a reward. Let me think and see what is best."

He sat down, put his arms around his knees and thought: I killed too many people in the past, so after I turned over a new leaf, I laid a rule down for myself and restricted the killing to only three a day. Thus, I was able to control myself. Even if I killed three people a day, I would have killed only a thousand a year. I often went for several days without killing anyone; if I did, I might kill only one or two, like the day when I killed Sun Wannian and Zhu Wanchun of the Snow Mountain School, I killed only two. The nickname 'Not More Than Three A Day' makes great sense, of course, but it is a pity that the rascals amongst the rivers and lakes do not appreciate its subtlety. The young man here neither puts on airs nor licks my boots. These characteristics are very hard to come by, but I do not really care about them. However, he likes my nickname very much after hearing it. I am already past my sixtieth year, so what sort of person have I not seen yet? I can tell the truth from falsehood in just one glance, so I know that the young man really means it when he says that my nickname sounds very nice.

After muttering to himself for a while, the old man said to Shi Potian, "I have three treasures. The first, the 'Liquor of Dark Ice and Blue Flame', has already been drunk by you. I am not giving it to you, so you have to replace it. The second treasure is my accomplishment in martial arts. You will benefit much if you learn these martial arts. As for the third treasure, it is none other than my grand-daughter, A'Dang. Of these last two treasures, you can have only one. Do you want to learn my martial arts, or do you want my A'Dang?"

Definitions, explanations and/or words left (mostly) in their original form:

Those covered in earlier chapters are not repeated.

1. *Tung oil (tong2 you2) = the oil of the tung tree (genus Aleurites, native to China and Japan) that is commonly used in paints and varnishes.*

2. *Mid-Autumn (Zhong1 Qiu1) = takes place on the fifteenth day of the eighth month.*

3. *Qinggong (qing1 gong1) = the highly-practised ability to run lightly at great speeds over long distances and to leap over great heights.*

4. *Nü'er Hong from Shaoxing (Shao4 Xing2 Nü3 Er2 Hong2) = a type rice wine from Shaoxing City in Zhejiang Province that is made at a daughter's birth and kept underground until her wedding feast.*

5. *Privet (nü3 zhen1) = a partly evergreen shrub of the genus Ligustrum with small white flowers and black berries.*

6. *Darling Shi (Shi2 Lang2) = 'Lang2', whose approximate English equivalent is 'Darling', is a term of affection used by a woman when addressing her husband or lover. It is usually used as a suffix after the husband/lover's surname.*

Chapter 6 - Scars

Both of Shi Potian's sleeves swept out towards the sword. A loud *ke-chi* was heard, followed by a *hu*. Suddenly, Wang Wangren flew backwards and crashed heavily into the main door.

Both Ding Dang and Shi Potian were stunned by Ding Busan's question.

Her heart thumping wildly like a fawn that was leaping about in confusion, Ding Dang thought: Grandfather's martial arts skills are a match for but only a few. If Darling Shi learns these divine techniques, he can roam the length and breadth of the 'jianghu' with even greater fame and prestige. He once said that the Clan of Eternal Happiness will soon meet with a great and terribly thorny catastrophe, so if he can learn Grandfather's martial arts, he will probably be able to head the danger off. He is a man and a true one at that, so as the leader of a populous clan in the realm of the rivers and lakes, he must naturally attach greater importance to his career than the personal relationship between us.

She stole a glance at Shi Potian and found him totally perplexed. It was obvious that he was unable to come to a decision about the matter.

Consequently, Ding Dang's heart could not help but sink in heaviness: Darling Shi has always been an unrestrained romantic in spirit and behaviour. I do not know how many lovers he has had throughout his free and easy life. Although he has been especially intimate with me for the past half-year, I am actually nothing more than a passing cloud in his eyes. Furthermore, my grandfather has such a bad name in the martial arts circle. The reputations of the Clan of Eternal Happiness and Shi Potian are not exactly good either, but they are nonetheless a long way off from Grandfather's. So now that he knows my identity and background, how can he still want me?

Her heart ached so much that her eyes became moist with tears.

"Hurry, speak!" Ding Busan insisted. "Do not think that you can get away with a bargain by learning my martial arts skills first and marrying A'Dang later. You might be even thinking of marrying A'Dang first, because the old man would naturally teach you martial arts on the basis of you being his grandson-in-law. That will definitely not do. Let me tell you: there is no one under the sun who

dares to be funny in front of Ding Busan. If you want one thing, you cannot have the other. If not, your little life will be in danger. Speak quickly!"

The urgency of the situation increased Ding Dang's concern. Afraid that her Darling Shi might say 'I want to learn Grandfather's martial arts skills' and thus destroy her life, she said, "Grandfather, I will tell you the truth. He is the leader of the Clan of Eternal Happiness, Shi Potian. He does have quite a reputation in the martial arts circle...."

"What?" asked Ding Busan in surprise. "He is the leader of the Clan of Eternal Happiness? He does not look the part, does he?"

"He does, he does," answered Ding Dang. "Although he is young, all the heroes in the Clan of Eternal Happiness submit themselves to him. Even highly skilled pugilists, like the 'Touch that Brings Back Life', the Physician Bei, listen to his commands as well."

"The Physician Bei listens to him too?" asked Ding Busan. "That cannot be, can it?"

"Yes, it can, it can," answered Ding Dang. "I saw it with my own eyes, so how can it be untrue? Grandfather, although you are a highly skilled pugilist, imagine if the leader of the Clan of Eternal Happiness learns martial arts under your tutelage...." Her meaning behind her words was clear: The martial arts skills of Physician Bei is not beneath yours. Clan-Leader Shi cannot study under you, so you should just allow him to have me instead.

At that moment, Shi Potian spoke up: "Grandfather, Ding Ding Dang Dang has made a mistake. I am not Shi Potian."

"So you are not Shi Potian?" asked Ding Busan. "Who then are you?"

"I am not a clan-leader," Shi Potian continued, "and I am not Ding Ding Dang Dang's 'Tian-ge'. I am Gouzazhong, and Gouzazhong is simply Gouzazhong. Although the name is unpleasant to the ears, I am definitely Gouzazhong."

Ding Busan held on to his stomach and laughed loudly for a long time. "Very good!" he said finally. "I want to reward you with a treasure, not because you are Clan-Leader Wa ('tile') or Clan-Leader Shi ('stone'). Neither is it based on whether A'Dang likes you or not. It is simply because Ding Busan has taken a fancy to you!"

I do not care if you are a bastard (gouzazhong), a stinking little boy (chou xiaozi) or a turtle who is the son of a bitch (wugui wangbadan). Since Ding Busan has taken a fancy to you, you have no choice but to accept one of my treasures."

Looking in turn at Ding Busan and Ding Dang, Shi Potian thought: This Ding Ding Dang Dang has mistaken me for her Tian-ge. The real Tian-ge will definitely return soon, so if I accept the gift, would I not be deceiving the girl, as well as her Tian-ge? But if I say that I prefer martial arts to the girl, I will break her heart. I had better not accept anything at all.

So he shook his head and said, "Grandfather, I have already drunk your 'Liquor of Dark Ice and Blue Flame'. Since I have difficulty replacing it, perhaps you should just consider it as a treasure that you have given me!"

Ding Busan's face darkened. "No, no," he said. "We have already agreed that the 'Liquor of Dark Ice and Blue Flame' must be replaced. Are you trying to go back on your word? That will not do. So, have you made your choice yet? Do you want A'Dang or the martial arts?"

Shi Potian stole a glance at Ding Dang. At the same time, she stole a glance at him as well. Their eyes met, but they quickly turned their heads away.

Ding Dang's face was pale, and the tears in her eyes finally began rolling down her cheeks. Arrogant and wilful, she would have reached out and twisted Shi Potian's ear -- like she usually did -- or stamped her foot and walked off in a huff. However, she could not display even a tiny bit of her headstrong personality in the presence of her grandfather. Furthermore, twisting Shi Potian's ear and stamping her foot at such a critical juncture would only serve to push the young man towards choosing martial arts. That could never be allowed to take place, so Ding Dang's heart was laden with a mix of anger and pain that she could not express.

Shi Potian glanced at the girl again. When he saw the tears streaming down her face, he could not bring himself to let her continue weeping. "Ding Ding Dang Dang," he said in a gentle voice, "I am telling you, you have definitely gotten the wrong person. If I am really your Tian-ge, is there still a need to make a choice? I would naturally choose ... choose you, not martial arts!"

Ding Dang's tears continued to fall like a broken string of pearls, but a smile

had appeared at the corner of her mouth. "You are not Tian-ge?" she asked. "How can there be a second Tian-ge under the sun?"

"Perhaps I really do look very much like your Tian-ge," answered Shi Potian. "That is why everyone has made this mistake."

"So you are still not admitting it?" asked Ding Dang with a smile. "All right, there are indeed people in this world whose facial features resemble one another. When I first met you early this year, you grabbed my hand roughly. Since I did not know you then, I turned my hand over and struck you at once, did I not?"

Shi Potian responded with a dumbfounded gaze, for he did not know how to answer her.

Consequently, Ding Dang became unhappy again. "Have you really forgotten everything after a serious bout of illness, or are you trying to wiggle your way out of things by pretending to be idiotic and dim-witted?" she asked angrily.

Scratching his head, Shi Potian replied: "You have obviously made a mistake. How would I know what happened between that Tian-ge and you?"

"You will not succeed in wiggling your way out even if you try," said Ding Dang. "That day, you had both my hands in your grasp. I was very worried, but you kept on laughing. Then, you reached out with your mouth ... and tried to ... tried to touch my face. I turned my head sideways and bit you on the shoulder. I had to bite until the wound bled before you set me free. You ... you should untie your shirt(1) and see if there is a scar on your left shoulder. You say that I have made a mistake ... but ... but you cannot remove the scar that I made with my teeth.

Shi Potian nodded in agreement. "That is correct," he said. "You have never bitten me, so my shoulder would naturally not bear a scar...." As he spoke, he untied his shirt and exposed his left shoulder. Almost at once, he was struck by a sudden shock. "Eh! This ... this is so strange!" he gasped aloud, for there were indeed two curved rows of teeth-marks on the shoulder.

It was also clear to all three people that the teeth-marks formed the outline of a small cherry-sized mouth. The scar that resulted from those marks protruded from the surface of the skin. Thus, there was no doubt that the scar had come from a person's bite, for other wounds would never have produced it.

"The little boy wanted to wiggle his way out," said Ding Busan with a cold laugh. "But he has finally failed. Let me tell you: A person who goes into the mountains a lot will eventually meet with a tiger. You, who have gone about unrestrained in romantic behaviour, will eventually be caught by a woman whom you will never be able to shake off. I too fell for such a ploy when I was young. If that was not the case, how would this world have A'Dang's father, and A'Dang in turn? That good-for-nothing brother of mine, Ding Busi, is the only one who has not managed to take a wife. Consequently, he has become obsessed and crazy in old age, wearing a mournful face the whole day just like a dog-bear coward(2). All right, we do not need a further digression. In that case, you want A'Dang, do you not?"

Shi Potian did not hear Ding Busan's question at all because he was distracted by the discovery of the scar on his shoulder. He was actually very astonished, for he could not recall when his shoulder was bitten. The teeth-marks showed that the bite had been done in a very ruthless manner, so how could he forget having suffered such a wound? In his heart, he knew that the many incomprehensible situations that he had found himself in recently had stemmed entirely from a mistaken identity, so this was the only issue that he could hardly find an answer for. Thus, he became lost in his own thoughts.

When Ding Busan noticed the young man's silence and the strange facial expression that accompanied it, he attributed it to bashfulness at once. To him, Shi Potian was simply too embarrassed to address the matter outright. So the old man laughed and said, "A'Dang, steer the boat and take us home!"

Startled and delighted at the same time, Ding Dang asked: "Grandfather, are you saying that we are taking him to our home?"

"He is my grandson-in-law," answered Ding Busan, "so why should I not take him home? If he sneaks away without warning, will Ding Busan still be able to conduct himself in public? You say that there are people like the 'Touch that Brings Back Life', the Physician Bei, in his clan, so it will not be easy to drag him out once he withdraws into his nest."

Ding Dang responded with a smile that stretched from one ear to the other. Casting a sideways glance at Shi Potian, she suddenly turned totally red in the face. Then, she picked the bamboo pole up and tapped it lightly against the pier.

The little boat glided through the arch under the bridge and swung out into the river.

Meanwhile, Shi Potian wanted to ask if he was really going to their home, but there were just too many doubts and suspicions on his mind. Therefore, he swallowed the question although it had already reached the tip of his tongue.

+ + +

The river shone like a piece of green satin in the moonlight. Whenever Ding Dang's bamboo pole entered the water, ripples would appear. Then, the little boat would glide smoothly over the satiny surface of the river. Sometimes, the grass on the bank would brush against the side of the boat, producing a soft rustling sound. Other times, the low-hanging branches of the willows would sweep against the hair of Ding Dang and Shi Potian, carressing them like soft and gentle hands.

The night, faintly scented with the fragrance of flowers, was so beautiful and quiet that Shi Potian thought he had entered the land of dreams once more.

The little boat slid through the arch of another bridge before gliding through the opening under a third one. Then, it floated along a winding course for a long time before arriving at a flight of steps that was made from a type of white-coloured stone. Ding Dang picked the hawser (mooring rope) up and threw it towards the steps, looping around a wooden stake. Finally, she covered her mouth and gave Shi Potian a smile before skipping up the steps.

Ding Busan laughed and said, "You are Jiao-ke today, so after you, please!"

Shi Potian did not know what to say, so he followed Ding Dang up the steps in a rather confused daze. Walking behind her, he passed through a small door that was painted in black and walked along a lengthy cobblestone path. Then, he passed through a moon-gate(3) and walked through a flower garden before coming to a stop at an octagonal pavilion.

Stepping into the pavilion behind him, Ding Busan smiled and said, "Jiao-ke, please sit down!"

Shi Potian did not understand what Jiao-ke was, but since Ding Busan told him to take a seat, he did as he was told. Then, Ding Busan took his grand-daughter

by the hand, retraced his steps through the flower garden and disappeared from sight.

The bright moon shone down from a westerly angle, creating long shadows with the flowers outside the pavilion. At the same time, a gentle breeze began to blow, swaying the trees and causing the swing beside the pavilion to move with a rhythm of its own.

Shi Potian touched the scar on his left shoulder, feeling totally perplexed. After quite a while, he heard a series of light footsteps as two middle-aged women walked through the flower garden towards him. Stopping just outside the pavilion, the women bowed slightly and said, "Xin Guanren, please proceed to the inner hall for a change of attire."

Although Shi Potian did not understand what the women meant, he guessed that they wanted him to go indoors. Therefore, he went with them without further thought. The little group walked past a lotus pond and along a corridor before entering a wing-room (xiang1 fang2)(4). A large tub of hot water stood in the room, with two cloth towels hanging on its rim. One of the women smiled and said, "Xin Guanren, please take a bath. Old Master says that we are rushed for time, so there no new clothes have been prepared. Please make do with what you have, and wear your own clothes." Then, the women left the room and closed the door behind them, cackling gleefully as they went.

Shi Potian thought: I am obviously called Gouzazhong, so how did I become 'Clan-Leader' in one moment and 'Tian-ge' in the next? When they called me 'Shi Potian', I thought that should be the end of the names, but now I have been given two new ones: 'Jiao-ke'(5) and 'Xin Guanren'. Yet, being there, he felt that he might as well stay and make the best of the situation. After all, Ding Busan and Ding Dang did not seem to bear any ill-will towards himself. Thus, throwing caution to the wind, he took his clothes off amidst the fragrance that drifted from the hot water in the tub. Then, he took a bath which invigorated him, before getting dressed again.

He had just finished putting his clothes on when a male voice spoke loudly outside the door: "Xin Guanren, please proceed to the hall and pay your respects to the Heaven and the Earth."

Shi Potian was startled, for he knew what 'paying respects to the Heaven and the Earth' meant. Adding two and two, he soon remembered what Xin Guanren was, for he had once heard his mother telling him a story about a Xin Guanren (i.e. "bridegroom") and a Xin Niangzi ("bride") who paid their respects to the Heaven and the Earth (bai4 tian1 di4) in a marriage ceremony.

Therefore, he stood dumbfounded until the man outside spoke again: " Xin Guanren, you are dressed, are you not?"

"Yes," answered Shi Potian.

The man pushed the door open and entered the room. He placed a longish strip of red silk around Shi's neck and pinned a red silk flower on to the front of his shirt. "Congratulations!" he said with a smile. "Congratulations!" Then, he took the young man by the arm and led him out of the room.

Flustered, Shi Potian followed the man through a maze of doors and corridors before arriving at the main hall.

Eight giant candles bathed the hall up in a bright albeit flickering light, illuminating the Eight Immortals Table (ba1 xian1 zhuo1) in the centre of the scene. The table, which had a square top that seated eight, was covered with a red tablecloth. Ding Busan stood in the midst of everything, facing towards the door.

When Shi Potian stepped into the hall, three other men in the corridor outside began blowing their bamboo flutes (di2 zi3). The man who was taking Shi Potian by the arm declared in a loud voice: "May the bride enter the hall."

The two middle-aged women whom Shi had seen earlier emerged amidst the sound of tinkling ornamental rings. Between the women was a third one who wore a red silk covering on her head and red garments on her body. She appeared to be none other than Ding Dang. All three women then went over and stood beside Shi Potian.

Blinded somewhat by the light of the candles and intoxicated by the fragrance of orchids and musk, Shi Potian found himself feeling confused, afraid and happy at the same time.

The man beside him spoke in a loud and clear voice: "Pay your respects to the

Heaven!"

Shi Potian saw Ding Dang kneeling gracefully and bowing towards the courtyard, but he was hesitant about doing the same.

"Kneel down and bow your head," the man whispered into Shi's ear before giving him a light push on the back.

It looks like I have to do it, thought Shi Potian, so he knelt and made a few haphazard bows.

The two women beside Ding Dang were so amused by his random bows that they burst into giggles.

"Pay your respects to the Earth!" said the man.

Shi Potian and Ding Dang turned around together, knelt and bowed towards the inner wall of the hall.

"Pay your respects to Grandfather!" said the man again.

Ding Busan got to his feet and stood before the couple. Ding Dang knelt and bowed first, followed by Shi Potian after a moment's hesitation.

"The husband and his wife pay their respects to each other!" said the man.

As Shi Potian watched Ding Dang turning towards him and falling to her knees, his mind suddenly became clear. "Grandfather, Ding Ding Dang Dang," he said loudly, "I am really not Clan-Leader Shi, and I am not your Tian-ge. You have all made a mistake, so you had better not ... not blame me in the future."

Ding Busan burst into laughter. "Little Rascal," he said, "you are still cracking such jokes at a time like this! No, I will not put any blame on you, not now, not ever."

"Ding Ding Dang Dang," said Shi Potian again, "let us lay things out upfront. This ceremony is just a game, or is it the real thing?"

The girl, who was already kneeling on the ground with the red silk covering still on her head, was surprised by the question. But she simply smiled and replied: "Of course, it is the real thing. How can this matter be ... be a game?"

"You have gotten the wrong person today," declared Shi Potian. "The matter

has nothing to do with me. When you start having regrets later on, you will pull my ear and bite my shoulder again. That will not do!"

Suddenly, the entire hall seemed terribly bright. Unable to contain her amusement, Ding Dang started to giggle before bursting into laughter. "I will never have any regrets," she said softly. "So long as you treat me well and true, I ... I will naturally not pull your ear or bite your shoulder."

"To have one's wife pull one's ear is right and proper!" declared Ding Busan in a loud voice. "After all, it has been like this since Pan Gu created the Heaven and the Earth(6). So what is there to do or not to do about it? My dear well-behaved grandson-in-law, A'Dang has been kneeling towards you for such a long time, so why are you still not returning the gesture?"

"Yes, yes!" answered Shi Potian. He knelt on the red felt rug and exchanged several bows with Ding Dang.

"The husband and his wife have exchanged bows, so the ceremony is complete!" announced the man who acted as the master-of-ceremonies. "Send the couple to the bridal chamber! May the bride and the groom enjoy a hundred years of gracious harmony, many children and grandchildren, as well as five lifetimes of prosperity!"

As the flautists struck up a loud tune on their bamboo flutes, one of the middle-aged women took a pair of red candles and led the way ahead. The other middle-aged woman and the master-of-ceremonies helped Ding Dang and Shi Potian respectively to their feet, and tied a length of red silk between them. Then, they herded the couple towards a room.

The room was much smaller than the one Shi Potian had at the headquarters of the Clan of Eternal Happiness. It was also not particularly luxurious in its furnishings, with only a pair of tall red candles on the table and pieces of red silk and paper hung and pasted in a haphazardly way. These were signs of a room decorated in haste, but they succeeded in adding quite a bit of cheer and festivity to the atmosphere.

The people led Shi Potian and Ding Dang to the bed, and sat them down on its edge. Then, they went over the table and poured out two cups of wine. "Congratulations, Gu-ye, Xiao-jie(7)," they said in unison. "It is time to drink the

nuptial cup." Then, they backed out of the room and closed the door, laughing and joking as they went.

Shi Potian's heart thumped wildly. Although he did not understand the affairs of the world, he was well aware that he had become husband-and-wife with Ding Dang after bowing to the Heaven and the Earth in a marriage ceremony. Looking at Ding Dang, he found her sitting up straight with the red silk covering still on her head. She did not move at all. After a moment of wondering what to say, Shi Potian asked: "Ding Ding Dang Dang, are you suffocating with that thing on your head?"

"I am indeed," answered Ding Dang with a smile. "Please take it off!"

Reaching out with his thumb and forefinger, Shi Potian took a corner of the red silk covering and pulled it gently off. He found Ding Dang's face and lips covered with red rouge, which made her look especially gorgeous and bashful in the candlelight. As a mixture of surprise and delight filled his heart, he gazed unblinkingly at the girl and said, "You ... you look really good."

Ding Dang smiled until a tiny dimple appeared on her left cheek before lowering her head slowly.

Just then, Ding Busan's voice was heard speaking loudly from a high place outside the room: "Tonight marks the auspicious return of my grand-daughter for marriage. Friends from unknown places who have honoured us with your presence, there is no harm in coming down for a celebratory cup of wine."

A voice from another high place replied: "The subordinate of the leader of Clan of Eternal Happiness, Bei Haishi, presents solemn greetings of peace and goodness to Third Master Ding. It is very inappropriate to disturb you so late at night, so please excuse us."

Shi Potian uttered a quiet gasp: "Ah! Mr Bei has come."

Ding Dang responded by knitting her elegant brows into a shallow frown. Then, she brought her forefinger to the centre of her lips, telling Shi Potian not to make any sound.

Outside, Ding Busan burst into laughter. "I was wondering which chicken-stealing and dog-pilfering friends have come," he said quite rudely, "but you

have turned out to be members of the Clan of Eternal Happiness. Are you going to drink some celebratory wine? But you had better not shout loudly and disturb my grandson-in-law and grand-daughter in their bridal chamber, for you have come too late for the rite of teasing the couple in their room."

Yet, Bei Haishi was not angered. He coughed a few times and said, "So today is the auspicious day on which the precious grand-daughter of Third Master Ding is married. My brothers and I have come in haste, so we have not brought a gift. To make up for our poor manners, we will come again another day to offer our congratulations and show our appreciation for the celebratory wine. Meanwhile, an urgent matter has come up at our clan, and I would like to see Clan-Leader Shi in person about it. Thus, I would be eternally grateful if you could lead us to him. If this was not the case, we would not have had the audacity to enter the esteemed abode of the Third Master Ding in the dead of the night, even if we had courage as vast as the sky."

"Physician Bei, you are also a highly-esteemed senior member of the martial arts circle," said Ding Busan, "so you need not treat me with such politeness. The Clan-Leader Shi whom you speak of is none other than my new grandson-in-law, Gouzazhong, is he not? He says that you have all gotten the wrong man, so there is no need to see him."

The eight men who had come with Bei Haishi were highly-skilled pugilists from their clan, including Mi Hengye and Chen Chongzhi. When these men heard Ding Busan calling their clan-leader a bastard, a few of them began to utter throaty growls of anger.

As for Bei Haishi, he had heard Shi Potian referring to himself by the unpleasant name a few times, so he knew that Ding Busan had no intention of insulting anyone. However, he found himself secretly worrying about the fact that his clan-leader had become the grandson-in-law of the evil Ding. Eventually, he said, "Third Master Ding, the matter at our clan needs urgent attention, so I must ask our Clan-Leader for his instructions. As for our Clan-Leader's jokes, we are aware that they happen quite frequently."

Shi Potian could hear from Bei Haishi's words and tone of voice that the situation did indeed seem rather urgent. Recalling how the latter had rescued him when he was attacked by the hot and cold streams of energy on the

Skyscraping Cliff, and spent days and nights watching over him with concern, he found himself unable to ignore the man's request and allow him to carry on in worry. Thus, he walked over to the window, pushed it open and called out in a loud voice: "Mr Bei, I am over here. Are all of you looking for me?"

"Indeed," answered Bei Haishi in delight. "Your subordinate has an urgent matter to report."

"I am Gouzazhong," said Shi Potian, "not your clan-leader. If you are looking for me, you have succeeded. If you are looking for your clan-leader, you have failed."

A slight expression of awkwardness flashed across Bei Haishi's face. "Clan-Leader, you are speaking in jest again," he said. "Please come out, so that we can step aside for a word."

"You want me to come out?" asked Shi Potian.

"Yes!" answered Bei Haishi.

Ding Dang walked over to Shi Potian and tugged at his sleeve. "Tian-ge, do not go out," she whispered.

"I will return as soon as I have made things clear to him," said Shi Potian. Then, he climbed clumsily through the window into the courtyard outside. There, he found Bei Haishi standing on the west wall, with eight men in a row on the roof of the building behind him. On the other hand, Ding Busan sat on a branch of the chestnut tree that grew in the eastern side of the courtyard, his weight causing the branch to bob up and down.

Ding Busan spoke: "Physician Bei, you want to speak to my grandson-in-law, but can I listen in?"

Bei Haishi responded by muttering to himself, thinking: You are a highly-esteemed senior member of the martial arts circle yourself, so how can you not understand the rules of the realm of the rivers and lakes? Since I have come to see the Clan-Leader in the dead of the night, the matter that we speak of will naturally be a great secret of clan. Hence, how could an outsider participate in the exchange? I have long heard about the haphazard ways of this man; now, I see that his reputation is not undeserved. Thus, he replied: "I am not in a place

to divulge anything. Since our Clan-Leader is present, he should naturally be the one to make a decision on this."

"Very good, very good indeed," said Ding Busan. "So you have pushed the responsibility on to my grandson-in-law. Hey, Gouzazhong, the Physician Bei has something to say to you, but I would like to listen in."

"So Grandfather wants to listen in," said Shi Potian. "What is there to be concerned about?"

"What a dear and well-behaved grandson!" said Ding Busan, laughing gleefully. "What a filial grandson indeed! Physician Bei, please speak quickly if you have something to say, for each moment of a night in spring is worth a thousand pieces of gold. My grand-daughter is in her bridal chamber, but you, an old man, have been here jabbering to no end. Are you not being a wet blanket that spoils the fun?"

Bei Haishi did not expect Shi Potian to make such a decision at all, but since he had given his word, he could hardly take it back. Feeling very displeased, he said, "Clan-Leader, guests from the Snow Mountain School have arrived at our headquarters for a visit."

Before Shi Potian could say anything, Ding Busan said, "There is nothing amazing about the Snow Mountain School."

"The Snow Mountain School?" repeated Shi Potian. "Are they people from Hua Wanzi Hua-guniang's group?" There were thousands upon hundreds of clans and schools in the martial arts circle, but he knew only about the Snow Mountain School alone. Within the school, there were thousands upon hundreds of members, but again, he knew only Hua Wanzi alone. Hence, he blurted her name out without further thought.

Smiles appeared on the faces of the eight highly-skilled members of the Clan of Eternal Happiness who had come with Bei Haishi: Our Clan-Leader is really amorous and fond of women. He has taken a new wife tonight, but he has not forgotten the beautiful woman from the Snow Mountain School.

"Hua Wanzi Hua-guniang is among the them," said Bei Haishi. "There are also a number of others. The group is led by the 'Frost of the North-west' (Qi4 Han2 Xi1 Bei3) Bai Wanjian, with eight or nine other siblings-at-arms who appear to be

highly-skilled pugilists of the Snow Mountain School."

"What is there to be amazed about Bai Wanjian?" snapped Ding Busan. "Even if that old fellow, Bai Zizai, comes in person, what is there to be concerned about? Physician Bei, I have heard that your 'Palm Technique of the Five Elements and the Six Directions' is really not bad, so why are you getting all flustered and alarmed over something as ordinary as the appearance of that little fellow Bai Wanjian?"

When Bei Haishi heard Ding Busan praising his 'Palm Technique of the Five Elements and the Six Directions', he could not help but feel a tinge of pride: This evil old man has always been very conceited, but he has actually given my Palm Technique of the Five Elements and the Six Directions due consideration. Hence, he smiled and replied: "It is but an inconsequential skill that is unworthy of mention. Although our Clan of Eternal Happiness is small, we are not afraid of being bullied or oppressed by any other clan or school in the martial arts circle. We have never had any dealings with the Snow Mountain School, but the 'Frost of the North-west' has come in full power and prestige to demand an audience with our Clan-Leader. We have asked him to wait until tomorrow, but he is unable to wait at all. There is probably a misunderstanding of some sort here, so we have come to seek some suggestions from our Clan-Leader."

"Hua-guniang broke into our headquarters last night," said Shi Potian. "She was captured by Incense-Master Chen, but released this morning. Could the Snow Mountain School be annoyed by this matter?"

"There is a possibility of that," answered Bei Haishi. "When I spoke to Incense-Master Chen, he told me that you treated Hua-guniang courteously. You did not even touch a single hair on her head or take her to task for breaking into our headquarters. You offered her birds' nest and silver before she left, so you really preserved the dignity of the Snow Mountain School in this matter. From the looks of things, I am afraid that the 'Frost of the North-west' has come regarding a different issue altogether."

"What do you want me to do?" asked Shi Potian.

"It is all up to you," answered Bei Haishi. "If you say 'Meet them with civility', we will go back and speak to them nicely. We will also give them a few mild

rebuffs. However, if you say, 'Meet them with force', we will beat them until they can no longer leave, for who asked them to march up to the Clan of Eternal Happiness with unbridled boldness and make such atrocious demands? It would be much better if you could go and look into the matter personally, because you would be able to respond to the situation then and there."

Shi Potian had been happy being in the same room with Ding Dang just a little while ago, but he was also extremely fearful. There was no peace in his heart, for he did not know what would happen after a night in the bridal chamber. Since he was not Ding Dang's "Tian-ge", the truth would eventually be revealed to the utter embarrassment of all the parties who had been involved in the marriage ceremony. Therefore, he was glad that Bei Haishi dropped by, for the visit had presented him with an opportunity to escape. Hence, he said, "In that case, I will go back and take a look. If they have misunderstood us, I will be honest and make things clear to them." Then, he turned and said, "Grandfather, Ding Ding Dang Dang, I am leaving."

"This is not good," said Ding Busan, scratching his head. "Those fellows from the Snow Mountain School have thrown my plans into disarray, so I had better go and get rid of them. After all, I killed two of their disciples a long time ago and got into a conflict with Old Bai. Even if I kill a few more of them, the grudge between us would still be accounted for in the same way."

The Snow Mountain School considered Ding Busan's killing of their disciples Sun Wannian and Zhu Wanchun as a terrible humiliation, so it kept the matter secret. When Shi Qing and Min Rou heard about the incident later, they kept quiet about it as well. Hence, there was no knowledge about this matter in the jianghu at all.

Hearing it, Bei Haishi thought: The Snow Mountain School is very powerful. Not only are its leaders and disciples highly skilled in martial arts, it has also maintained friendly relationships with the clans and schools in the central region. We do not need to engage such a formidable opponent for no rhyme or reason. The Clan of Eternal Happiness has its own problems which will arrive in the twinkling of an eye. So, it is not advantageous to take on additional involvements. Thus, he said, "It is good that our Clan-Leader is willing to meet the people of the Snow Mountain School in person. Third Master Ding, we do

not dare to bother you with such a trivial matter. Can we visit you again once things are settled?" He did not mention anything about 'drinking celebratory wine' because he hoped to persuade Shi Potian into giving up his marriage relationship with the Ding Family once they were back at their headquarters.

"Rubbish!" said Ding Busan angrily. "I have said that I want to go, so I will definitely make the trip there. There is no alternative besides bothering me, because I have made up my mind to be involved in this particular matter of the Clan of Eternal Happiness."

Listening to the conversation from the room, Ding Dang guessed that the Snow Mountain School had come to demand for an accounting of her husband's unrestrained behaviour. The man had probably found Hua Wanzi beautiful and went on to act indecently. There was also an eight or nine to ten chance that he had attempted to violate her by force. As for Incense-Master Chen's claim that his Clan-Leader 'did not even touch a single hair on her head', that was probably a ploy to cover things up. If not, why would he invite the woman to strengthen her body with some birds' nest? This did not even take the gift of silver into account.

Then, Ding Dang thought about her own predicament. It was their wedding night, but he actually wanted to dash off and meet Hua Wanzi. He was about to cast her aside, but she was not going to swallow her anger about it. When the argument between her grandfather and Bei Haishi turned into a deadlock, she leaped into the courtyard and said, "Grandfather, Darling Shi has something to attend to in his clan, so he has to return to their headquarters. We cannot allow my personal relationship with him to interfere with his work. Let us do things this way: You and I will go with Darling Shi, and see exactly what amazing people the Snow Mountain School has."

Shi Potian was delighted. Although he wanted to avoid the awkwardness of the bridal chamber, he was unwilling to be separated from Ding Dang. Hence, he smiled and said, "How wonderful; how wonderful indeed! Ding Ding Dang Dang, you and I will go together, and Grandfather will go with us too!"

With the decision made, Bei Haishi and his group did not find it appropriate to raise further objections.

The party went to the bank of the river and boarded the big boat that belonged to the Clan of Eternal Happiness for the trip back to the headquarters. By and by, Bei Haishi whispered to Shi Potian: "Clan-Leader, you must persuade the Third Master Ding not to injure anyone from the Snow Mountain School, regardless of what happens. After all, it is meaningless to make many enemies."

"Yes," said Shi Potian with a nod. "How can anyone kill another man for no rhyme or reason? Would he not become a bad person then?"

When the party arrived at the headquarters of the Clan of Eternal Happiness, Ding Dang said, "Tian-ge, I want to change into a set of men's clothes in your room. Then, I will go with you to meet the Hua-guniang who looks like the flower and the moon."

"Why?" asked Shi Potian, finding the request very interesting.

"I do not want her to know that I am your wife," answered Ding Dang with a smile. "It will also be more conducive for conversations."

When Shi Potian noticed how bashful and proud Ding Dang was when she uttered the words 'I am your wife', warmth filled his heart. "Very good, I will go with you to get a change of clothing," he said.

"I want to dress up too!" said Ding Busan. "Would it not be good if I disguised myself as a low-ranking leader of your clan?"

This willingness to use a disguise was exactly what Bei Haishi sought, for he did not want the Snow Mountain School to know that Ding Busan had become involved with the clan. Yet, Bei did not reveal his thoughts and emotions, preferring instead to say: "Third Master Ding, please do anything you wish."

Ding Busan and his grand-daughter followed Shi Potian to his room, where Shijian had dozed off. When they pushed the door open, the maidservant woke up with a start. Jumping off the bed, she was even more surprised to see the Dings.

Unable to make things clear to Shijian within a short period of time, Shi Potian simply said, "Elder Sister Shijian, they would like to put on some disguises. You ... you go and help them." He was deeply worried that the maidservant would ask

about this and that, for the marriage ceremony that he had underwent earlier was not something that he could freely speak of. Hence, he headed for the decorated reception hall beyond the room as soon as he had given the brief instructions.

The time needed to cook a pot of rice passed (about 50 minutes). Chen Chongzhi appeared outside the hall and said in a loud voice: "Clan-Leader, all our brothers are waiting for your arrival at the Hall of the Ferocious Tiger."

At that moment, Ding Dang pushed the door-curtain aside and entered the hall. "All right, let us go," she said with a smile.

Shi Potian was taken aback, for an exquisitely dressed and polished young man had suddenly appeared before his eyes. Taking a second look, he realised that it was only Ding Dang, who was dressed in a black robe with a scholar's cloth on her head and a folding fan in her hand. Although he did not know what 'scholarly and refined' meant, he thought that she looked better in the outfit than the bridal clothes that she was wearing earlier.

As for Ding Busan, he was dressed in a tunic made of coarse cloth, with a pair of hemp sandals on his feet. His face was darkened with a light coat of ink, and his right shoulder hung lower than his left. He walked with a limp and regarded his surroundings with a beastly expression on his face.

Shi Potian could hardly recognise the old man at first. Then, he burst into laughter and said, "Grandfather, your appearance has changed entirely."

By and by, Chen Chongzhi whispered to Shi Potian: "Clan-Leader, do you want to take some weapons with you?"

"What weapons?" asked Shi Potian with his eyes opened wide. "Why should I take weapons with me?"

"Yes! Yes!" answered Chen Chongzhi at once, thinking that the young man was making an ironic remark. Then, he led the group to the Hall of the Ferocious Tiger.

When Chen Chongzhi pushed the door of the hall open and stepped inside, the people who had gathered rose to their feet and said, "Our respects to the Clan-Leader!"

Shi Potian was so shocked that he jumped with fright, for he had never expected to see a hall that was so grand and filled with so many people. He also did not know how to respond to the men who bowed in greeting; neither did he know what to say. Thus, he could not help standing shell-shocked and flustered at the entrance.

As he -- a rural young man who had hardly been exposed to society -- took in the brightly-lit candles on the tables, the tall and short men on both sides of the aisle, as well as the empty tigerskin-draped armchair that stood in the centre of gathering, he became so intimidated that he did not even dare to breathe. His eyes looked towards Bei Haishi in an appeal for help, in the hope that the latter would tell him how to handle the situation right.

Bei Haishi rushed over to the door at once, took Shi Potian by the arm and said in a quiet voice: "Clan-Leader, we will take our seats first. Then, we will invite our friends from the Snow Mountain School into the hall."

Shi Potian listened to everything Bei Haishi suggested, of course, and allowed himself to be led to the tigerskin-draped armchair.

"Please take a seat!" whispered Bei Haishi.

"Here?" asked Shi Potian as an indescribable fear filled his heart. He looked towards Ding Dang, hoping that she would take him by the hand and help him escape from the hall. It would be best if they went off to some remote mountains far away, for he did not want to return to this place again.

But Ding Dang responded with only a smile.

Yet, Shi Potian felt a burst of affection from deep within her eyes, as if she was saying: "Tian-ge, do not be afraid. I am here by your side. If anything difficult happens, I will help you." Almost immediately, his spirits were lifted. As gratitude and assurance filled his heart, he took his seat on the tigerskin-draped armchair in the middle of the hall.

After he was seated, Ding Busan and Ding Dang went up and stood behind his chair. Then, the men in the hall sat down one after the other in accordance to their respective seniorities.

Bei Haishi spoke: "Brothers, our Clan-Leader has been seriously ill in recent

days. Fortunately, the Heavens stood by the good man. He was recovered to a great extent; but he was not regained his energy in full. Our Clan-Leader should actually be spending many days in quiet recuperation before he can personally attend to the affairs of the clan again, but our friends from the Snow Mountain School have insisted on meeting with him at all costs, as if our Clan-Leader will never recover from his illness. Heh-heh, our Clan-Leader has a deep and profound level of internal strength, so how can a small illness bother him at all? Clan-Leader, what do you think if we invite our friends from the Snow Mountain School into the hall right now?"

"Mm," grunted Shi Potian in reply, not knowing whether he should be saying "Yes" or "No".

"We will now re-arrange the seating!" declared Bei Haishi to the hall. "All the brothers on the west of the aisle should sit on the other side."

The men began moving and were soon seated on the east of the aisle. Then, several clan-members who were standing by came up and placed a row of nine armchairs on the vacated western side.

Finally, Bei Haishi said, "Incense-Master Mi, please usher the guests into the meeting."

"Yes," answered Mi Hengye, turning around and taking his leave.

Shortly after that, footsteps sounded outside the hall. As four clan-members threw the huge doors open, Mi Hengye stepped to the side and made an announcement in a loud voice: "Clan-Leader, our friends from the Snow Mountain School have arrived!"

"We will go and meet them!" whispered Bei Haishi to Shi Potian, giving the latter's sleeve a slight tug.

"We will?" asked Shi Potian. He rose hesitantly to his feet and followed Bei Haishi to the entrance of the hall.

The nine visitors from the Snow Mountain School were all dressed in long robes of white. The man at the head of the group was a very tall and heroic-looking fellow about forty-two or forty-three years old. When he was about a zhang (3.33 metres) away from Shi Potian, he came to a sudden stop and stared

so intently at the latter, as if he was trying to look right into the depths of his heart.

Meanwhile, Shi Potian smiled foolishly at the guest in what he (Shi) considered to be a greeting.

Bei Haishi spoke: "Clan-Leader, this is he who shakes the western frontiers with strength, impressiveness and a set of peerless swordplay skills, the well-known 'Frost of the North-west' Bai Wanjian, the Big Brother Bai."

Shi Potian nodded his head and gave another foolish-looking smile. The only person whom he knew was the last member of group, Hua Wanzi, so he smiled again and said, "Hua-guniang, you have come again."

As soon as these words were uttered, the expressions of the faces of the nine Snow Mountain disciples changed at once.

Hua Wanzi felt so awkward that she snorted in disgust and turned her head away.

Bai Wanjian was the eldest son of the 'Gentleman of Impressive Strength and Virtue' Bai Zizai, who was also the leader of the Snow Mountain School. Bai Wanjian and his siblings-at-arms had the character 'Wan' in their names as the marker of their places in the generational hierarchy. Since 'Wanjian' meant 'Ten Thousand Swords', the name seemed to indicate a level of accomplishment in swordplay that exceeded those of his peers. On his part, Bai Zizai was indeed proud of his son's pugilistic abilities, so he had given him the name.

Known collectively with the 'Dragon of Wind and Fire' Feng Wanli as the 'Twin Heroes of the Snow Mountain' (Xue³ Shan¹ Shuang¹ Jie²), Bai Wanjian had really renowned in the martial arts circle. If he had not visited the Clan of Eternal Happiness in person, Bei Haishi would not have rushed over to Ding Busan's home in the dead of the night and had Shi Potian brought back to the headquarters.

By then, Bai Wanjian was furious, for he had waited for Shi Potian in the adjacent hall for two whole shichen (four hours). During this time, his cup of tea had been brewed so often that it was no longer any different from plain water, for the leaves had lost their flavour much earlier. Now that he had finally stepped into the Hall of the Ferocious Tiger, he found a clan-leader who sat

ostentiously on his armchair in the middle of the hall. This clan-leader did not even say anything polite -- such as "I have long heard about you" -- when Bei Haishi made the introductions, preferring instead to greet his younger sister-at-arms. How then could Bai Wanjian not hit the roof in anger? He thought: From the looks of things, there is an eight to ten chance that he is indeed the fellow whom we seek. Our enquiries in the jianghu during the past few days have all found Clan-Leader Shi of the Clan of Eternal Happiness to be a lecherous man. Thus, he must naturally be the one. While he cannot be bothered with me, he has eyed Sister Hua with lust and tried to please her with his words. If he can act this way in front of everyone, Sister Hua's experience while being held captive would have been a lot worse.

Yet, as a man of esteemed position, Bai Wanjian was unwilling to create a scene then and there. Instead, he gazed coldly at Shi Potian from the corner of his eye. He had not uttered a single word, but scorn was already written all over his face.

"Hua-guniang, is the wound on your thigh better?" asked Shi Potian again. "Does it still hurt?"

Hua Wanzi's face turned totally red, while the remaining eight disciples of the Snow Mountain School gripped the hilts of their swords.

"Friends, you have come from afar," said Bei Haishi quickly. "Please take a seat, please take a seat. Our Clan-Leader has not been feeling well recently, so he should actually not be receiving any visitors. However, because of your stature, he has come out to meet you despite his illness. We are very sorry that you have had to wait for a long time."

Bai Wanjian responded with a snort of disgust before striding up to the first armchair on the west of the aisle and sitting down. Geng Wanzhong took the second seat, followed by Ke Wanjun, Wang Wanren and the others. Hua Wanzi sat on the last chair.

Several members of the Clan of Eternal Happiness grinned gleefully at the sight, thinking: Our Clan-Leader gained an upper hand over all you as soon as he opened his mouth, for he showed concerned over your younger sister's thigh. Heh-heh, you may be the 'Frost of the North-west', but there was still nothing

you could do, could you?

Bei Haishi accompanied Shi Potian back to his seat, while their servants served tea.

By and by, Bei Haishi raised his clasped fists and said, "Members from every level of our clan have long heard about the glorious name of the Gentleman of Impressive Strength and Virtue from the Snow Mountain School, as well as those of the Twin Heroes of the Snow Mountain and the friends who are present here. However, due to our location in the south of the Great River, we have been unable to develop a closer relationship. We are honoured to have Master Bai and the others here today, for it is indeed our great fortune to meet with the heroes from the Snow Mountain of the North-west."

Bai Wanjian returned the greeting by raising his clasped fists. He said, "The Physician Bei possesses the touch that brings back life, and the peerless Palm Technique of the Five Elements and the Six Directions. Thus, I have also admired you for a long time. Furthermore, your clan has numerous members of outstanding ability. While I do not know many of them in person, I have heard of their names a long time ago." While he spoke a few words of praise for Bei Haishi and the members of the Clan of Eternal Happiness, he did not mention Shi Potian at all.

"You flatter us, you flatter us!" answered Bei Haishi humbly. Then, pretending that he was not aware of the purpose of the visit, he said, "I wonder how many days have all of you been in Zhenjiang. Have you toured the Golden Hill (Jin1 Shan1) and the Burnt Hill (Jiao1 Shan1)? Let our Clan-Leader play host one day and treat all of you to some drinks at a wineshop in town. Then, we can go and take in the scenery of modest Zhenjiang." He spoke casually, without broaching the subject of the Snow Mountain School's visit at all.

Eventually, it was Bai Wanjian who reached the end of his tether first. Raising his voice, he said, "Many people in the jianghu know that your Clan-Leader Shi excels in martial arts. I wonder which clan or school his skills come from."

The question caught the interest of the members of the Clan of Eternal Happiness: Our Clan-Leader has never spoken about the affiliation of his martial arts skills. Whenever anyone brings the subject up during a compliment, he

would only smile silently in response. Mr Bei told us that he is the nephew-at-arms of the previous Clan-Leader Situ*, but his skills are entirely different from that of the latter. Would he be willing to divulge the information now?

Shi Potian began his reply in a hesitant manner: "This ... er ... are you asking about my martial arts skills? I ... do not know any at all."

Almost at once, the remaining doubts in Bai Wanjian's mind vanished. Laughing sarcastically, he said, "The Clan of Eternal Happiness has innumerable heroic and capable members. If Clan-Leader Shi does not know any martial arts, how can you lord over such a large group of outstanding men? Your statement can only be used to deceive little children. Perhaps you are ashamed to tell others about your teacher and origin, and I wonder why that is so."

"You say that I am deceiving little children?" asked Shi Potian. "Who is a child here? Ding Ding Dang Dang, she ... she is not a child. I did not deceive her. I have told her long before that I am not her Tian-ge." Although he was talking with Bai Wanjian, his nose was distracted by the fragrance that came from Ding Dang's clothes. Therefore, his heart was turned entirely towards the girl behind his armchair.

Bai Wanjian did not know what the Ding Ding Dang Dang that he spoke about was, so he simply attributed Shi Potian's reply to a guilty conscience as well as a consequent and deliberate attempt to drag irrelevant matters into the conversation. Therefore, Bai's face became even sterner as he made his response: "Clan-Leader Shi, we will just open the windows and speak in the light. Putting things bluntly, you have not forgotten entirely about the martial arts skills that you learnt in Lingxiao City, have you?"

Almost at once, the expressions on the faces of the members of the Clan of Eternal Happiness changed. The men knew that Lingxiao City in the western region was the home of the Snow Mountain School. If Bai Wanjian was right, could their clan-leader have practised martial arts under the tutelage of the Snow Mountain School before? These people had come with such power and prestige, so could their visit be related to an internal matter of their school?

"Lingxiao City?" asked Shi Potian dumbly. "What place is that? I have never practised any martial arts before. If I have, how can I forget all about them?"

By then, even the members of the Clan of Eternal Happiness found Shi Potian's statements incredulous. There was no one in the martial arts circle who did not know the name of 'Lingxiao City'. He, Shi Potian, was the leader of the Clan of Eternal Happiness, yet he actually pretended that he had never heard of the place before. In addition, he said that he had never learnt any martial arts. Such a blatant lie harmed his reputation, of course, yet there were individuals who felt that there was a greater purpose behind these words.

To Bai Wanjian and his group, the words were a great insult, for they clearly indicated that Shi Potian had little care or respect for the Snow Mountain School. He even brushed 'Lingxiao City' off with a single casual remark.

Unable to restrain himself any longer, Wang Wanren spoke in a loud voice: "If you put it this way, Clan-Leader Shi, you are looking too much down your nose at us. In your eyes, all the disciples of the Snow Mountain School are not worth even a single qian (5 grammes of silver)."

Shi Potian saw the anger on his face and guessed that he had said the wrong thing. Thus, he replied quickly: "No, no. How can I say that the disciples of the Snow Mountain School are not worth even a single qian? Like ... like ... like ..." During his stay on the Skyscraping Cliff, he would follow Xie Yanke to town several times a year to buy rice and salt, so he knew that the greater the worth of an object, the better the object would be. He wanted to say a few nice words to make up for his mistake and calm Wang Wanren down, yet after uttering "like..." three times, he could not come up with a suitable illustration.

He had seen Geng Wanzhong, Ke Wanjun, Wang Wanren and the few others before at Hou Jian Ji, but he did not know their names. However, he was more familiar with Hua Wanzi. Therefore, in a moment of desperation, he said, "Like Hua Wanzi Hua-guniang. She is worth a lot of qian ... a whole lot of silver..."

A *hu* sounded. The nine visitors from the Snow Mountain School got to their feet at the same time. A brilliant flash of light followed as eight swords came out of their sheaths. Except for Bai Wanjian, the visitors held their swords before their chests and stood in a semicircle around Shi Potian.

Raising his finger in accusation, Wang Wanren said, "You who are surnamed Shi, you have gone too far in uttering those obscenities. Although we are in the

pool of the dragon and the den of lion right now, we will not take the insult lightly!"

Shi Potian could see that the visitors' anger had shot up into the sky, yet he could not grasp what was happening at all: I said something that was obviously nice, but why are all of you upset? So he turned to Ding Dang and asked: "Ding Ding Dang Dang, did I say something wrong?"

Having heard her husband humiliating Hua Wanzi in front of everyone earlier, Ding Dang knew that he did not care about her (Hua) at all. Thus, she was both delighted and comforted. Now, hearing his question, she smiled and replied: "I do not know. Perhaps Hua-guniang is not worth a whole lot of silver, but there is no way of knowing it at the moment."

Nodding, Shi Potian said, "So let us say that Hua-guniang is not worth much silver. She is very cheap and lowly, but that is not a reason to get angry!"

The members of the Clan of Eternal Happiness burst into laughter. To them, their clan-leader's statement was an indication of his decision to enter into battle with the Snow Mountain School. Amidst the noise, someone piped up: "I cannot afford anything expensive, but if it is cheap, heh-heh, we can consider getting together..."

A greenish light flashed, followed by a *ding*. As it turned out, Wang Wanren had become so furious that he had sent his sword towards Shi Potian's chest. Bai Wanjian had responded at once, unsheathing his sword casually and pushing his brother's weapon away lightly. However, Wang Wanren's wrist felt so numb that his sword almost slipped out of his hand. Therefore, he was unable to resume his attack.

"Our conflict with this man is as deep as the ocean," said Bai Wanjian in a loud voice. "How can he be despatched with a single stroke of the sword?" Returning his sword to its sheath, he added: "Clan-Leader Shi, do you recognise me?"

"I do," answered Shi Potian with a nod of his head. "You are the 'Frost of the North-west' Bai Wanjian, Master Bai of the Snow Mountain School."

"Very good," said Bai Wanjian. "Do you acknowledge the things that you have done before?"

"Of course, I do," said Shi Potian.

Bai Wanjian grunted in affirmation and said, "Let me ask you then: When you were at Lingxiao City, what was your name?"

"I was at Lingxiao City?" asked Shi Potian in return, scratching his head. "When did I go there? Ah, I know! The year I left the mountains in search of Mother and A'Huang, I passed through many cities and towns. I did not know their names, so one of them must have been called Lingxiao City."

The expression on Bai Wanjian's face became cold. However, he continued to speak in measured tones, with each word coming slowly out of his mouth: "You had better not drag irrelevant matters into the conversation and pretend that you do not know what is going on! Your real name is not Shi Potian!"

"That is correct, that is correct!" said Shi Potian with a smile. "I have never been Shi Potian in the first place, but everyone has been making this mistake. Master Bai, you are amazing, for you know that I am not Shi Potian."

"So what is your original surname and true name?" asked Bai Wanjian. "Speak it out, so that all of us may hear."

"What is he called?" roared Wang Wanren in anger. "He is ... Gouzazhong (Bastard)!"

This time, the men of the Clan of Eternal Happiness rose to their feet, and responded with shouts and curses. More than ten of them also drew their weapons.

By making that statement, Wang Wanren had already given his life up. He thought: I want to curse that bastard, so if I end up being chopped to pieces, I would not even frown.

Yet, Shi Potian burst out laughing. Clapping his hands, he said, "Yes, that is right! I am actually called Gouzazhong. How did you know?"

The words caught everyone in surprise that they could not help but look at one another for answers. None of them -- except Bei Haishi, Ding Busan and Ding Dang -- had heard him mention the name of 'Gouzazhong' before, so they were rather bewildered.

Yet, Bai Wanjian thought: This fellow has turned out to be very treacherous and cunning. It is remarkable how he can take abuse in such a calm manner, so I have to be even more careful with him. I cannot take things lightly at all.

Meanwhile, Wang Wanren threw his head back and laughed. "Ha-ha, so you are actually called Gouzazhong!" he said. "Ha-ha, what a joke, what a joke indeed!"

"What is so funny about my being called Gouzazhong?" asked Shi Potian. "The name is not a good one, but if it is what your mother called you in the past, you are Gouzazhong no matter what."

"Rubbish!" roared Wang Wanren. Lifting his sword in a stroke known as the 'Flying Sand that Moves the Rocks' (Fei1 Sha1 Zou3 Shi2), he concentrated his internal energy on the tip of his sword and sent it towards Shi Potian's chest in a cold flash of light.

This time, Bai Wanjian did not stop him, for he wanted to see what strange and amazing pugilistic skills that Shi Potian had picked up in recent years, for he (Shi) had been able to get such a large number of outstanding men to obey him as the leader of a clan despite his young age. So, Bai Wanjian simply said, "Brother Wang, do not be violent." He left his chair, as if he was about to restrain his brother, but he allowed the latter to pass by and pounce on Shi Potian.

Although Shi had mastered a top-class skill in internal strength, he had not learnt anything about fighting with the enemy at close quarters through the exchange of strokes. Therefore, he did not know how to avoid Wang Wanren's sword that approached at a terribly swift pace. Neither did he know how to fend the sword off. Hence, in a moment of desperation, he reacted with a reflexive push of his hands. The lengthy sleeves of the long robe that he wore swept out towards the on-coming sword.

A loud *ke-chi* was heard, followed by a *hu*. Suddenly, Wang Wangren flew backwards and crashed heavily into the main door.

Earlier, when the nine visitors from the Snow Mountain School entered the Hall of the Ferocious Tiger, the members of the Clan of Eternal Happiness had propped the main door up with wooden poles. In the event of a disagreement

and a fight, they would simply trap the enemy as if it was a turtle in an earthen jar.

The main door of the Hall of the Ferocious Tiger was made from the wood of the pear tree. Besides being exceptionally hard, the door also had inlays of sheet-iron and rivets of copper. After Wang Wanren's back struck the door, a *bu-bu* sound was heard as the man's shoulders were pierced by the two broken halves of his own sword.

As it turned out, the energy that was created by Shi Potian's sweeping sleeves had broken Wang's sword into two. Then, it had pressed so strongly against Wang that he could hardly breathe. The strength in his body had somehow vanished, so his arms had followed the on-coming force and turned the broken sword on to himself. Consequently, he sat slumped on the ground, for he could no longer move. Blood flowed profusely from the wounds on his shoulders, staining his white robe red within moments.

Ke Wanjun and Hua Wanzi rushed over to him as quickly as they could, checking his breath and taking his pulse. Fortunately, Shi Potian did not know how to use the rich internal strength that he had, so the injuries that Wang suffered were merely external ones that did not threaten his life.

The incident startled the disciples of the Snow Mountain School, of course, but it also made them furious. On the other hand, the men of the Clan of Eternal Happiness were delighted. Yet, they were greatly surprised by what they had witnessed, because earlier displays of their clan-leader's martial arts skills had not shown them to be particularly wonderful.

The only reason why they had made the young man their clan-leader was his willingness to sacrifice himself to save the lives of all the clan-members, in exchange for the opportunity to escape from trouble. Furthermore, Bei Haishi had thrown in all he had to assist the young man in his new position. Thus, the members submitted to Clan-Leader Shi largely because they feared Bei Haishi. They never thought that Clan-Leader Shi would have such a profound level of internal strength.

As for Bei Haishi himself, he simply nodded in silence, his heart filled with a mixture of concern and joy.

By and by, Bai Wanjian sneered and said, "Clan-Leader Shi, we are all members of the martial arts circle, so there is a generational hierarchy that guides us. He who defies his superiors and starts a rebellion can be put to death by anyone else. The common saying puts it well: He who teaches one for but a day, is one's father for life. Since you were once a martial arts student at our Snow Mountain School, my Brother Wang can be considered your uncle-at-arms. So what is the reason for your violence towards him? There is nothing under the sun that can supercede the word of reason. You may be highly-skilled in martial arts, but can you blot all the generational hierarchies and the righteousness of the pugilistic schools out with a single wave of your hand?"

Shi Potian was lost. "What are you talking about?" he asked. "I do not understand even one sentence of what you say. When did I study martial arts at your Snow Mountain School?"

"So, we have come this far," said Bai Wanjian, "but you are still not acknowledging who you are. You call yourself Gouzazhong, heh-heh, I have nothing to say if you choose to degrade yourself. But your parents are renowned heroes of righteousness in the jianghu. Yet, you are unafraid of being a disgrace to their heroic names. You do not acknowledge who your teacher is, so are you denying your parents as well?"

"You know my parents?" asked Shi Potian in delight. "Nothing is more wonderful than that! Master Bai, please tell me, where is my mother? Who is my father?" As he spoke, he got to his feet and bowed deeply, with an unusually sincere expression on his face.

Bai Wanjian was stunned, for he could not figure out the intentions behind the young man's pretence. Then, he thought: This fellow is treacherous and wicked, so he must not be dealt with according to the common principles of life. He is even willing to deny his parents for the sake of hiding his identity. Besides, his willingness to call himself a bastard shows that he has long forgotten about his forefathers and parents. Suddenly, his heart was overcome with a great sorrow. Sighing heavily, he said, "Such a beautiful character and so much talent, yet so unwilling to be good. How detestable! How regrettable!"

Shi Potian was shocked: "Master Bai, what do you mean 'detestable' and 'regrettable'? What has happened to my father and mother?" Care and concern

were visible on his face as he spoke.

Realising that the young man's emotions were both spontaneous and genuine, Bai Wanjian said, "So you are not totally devoid of conscience, for your parents are still on your heart. Your father and mother are heroic and formidable people with remarkable skills in swordplay, so what danger can they be in, roaming the realm of the rivers and lakes hand-in-hand?"

Bai's statements caused the men of the Clan of Eternal Happiness to exchange puzzled looks: We know absolute nothing about the background and identity of our Clan-Leader. But now, his parents seem to be well-known people in the jianghu, people who are 'heroic and formidable with remarkable skills in swordplay'. There are not many couples in the martial arts circle who can live up to Bai Wanjian's commendation, so who are they?

However, Bei Haishi knew the answer at once: Could he be the son of the Twin Swords of Black and White from Xuansu Manor? If that is the case ... things will be somewhat of a bother.

Just then, Wang Wanren -- who had had the wind knocked out of him earlier -- heaved a lengthy groan.

The groan from the man, who was being supported under the arms by Ke Wanjun and Hua Wanzi, sounded so painful that Shi Potian became very concerned. "Why did this Big Brother here suddenly fly backwards a moment ago?" he asked. "It looks as if the knock has wounded him, does it not? Mr Bei, what do you think? Does his condition look serious?"

None of those who were gathered could say that these questions were not intended to ridicule the hapless Wang Wanren, so much so that half of the men of the Clan of Eternal Happiness burst out laughing. Some of them said, "The man's injuries cannot be called 'serious', yet they were not particularly light either." Others said, "The highly skilled pugilists of the Snow Mountain School came in the middle of the night during the third watch(7) to create trouble with such power and prestige, so we thought they were really people with astonishing accomplishments in martial arts. Heh-heh, they have turned out to be so astonishing that their reputations are well-deserved."

Turning a deaf ear to the comments, Bai Wanjian said loudly: "Clan-Leader Shi,

we have come today because of a private matter that concerns you and you alone. It does not involve the other friends here, so the disciples of the Snow Mountain School do not wish to engage in meaningless arguments with anyone else. Shi Zhongyu, I want to ask you only one question: Do you admit it or not?"

"Shi Zhongyu?" asked Shi Potian in surprise. "Who is Shi Zhongyu? What do you want me to admit?"

Bai Wanjian replied: "Your teacher, the Dragon of Wind and Fire, lost an arm because of your unscrupulous and evil actions. Yet, Elder Brother Feng's kindness to you was as great as the mountains. Is there therefore any shred of shame left in your heart?" He spoke with such sincerity, hoping that the young man's conscience would eventually lead him into repentance.

However, Shi Potian did not understand what these statements were about. "The Dragon of Wind and Fire, Elder Brother Feng?" he asked. "Who is he? Why did he lose an arm because of my unscrupulous and evil actions?" What ... what unscrupulous and evil actions did I do?"

To Bai Wanjian, the young man's refusal to admit to anything was clearly a bid to force himself (Bai) into a public revelation of the tragedy of his beloved daughter's humiliation and her subsequent ravine-leaping suicide. So he became so furious that his eyes almost seemed as if they were about to pop out of his face. A loud *shua* sounded as he unsheathed his sword. Then, with a shake of his wrist and a loud *tu*, he pushed the blade back into its scabbard. Finally, he pointed to the three marks on one of pillars in the hall and said in a loud voice: "Friends, the swordplay techniques of my Snow Mountain School are lowly and unworthy of your smiles of approval. However, these swordplay techniques that have been handed down by the founder of our school would often leave six-sided snowflake-shaped scars on opponents who are fortunate enough to be stabbed with them. That is also how our school received its name."

The men in the hall looked towards the pillar, which bore a total of six marks made by the sword on its red-lacquered surface. These marks were arranged symmetrically to form the six points of a hexagon, with each point being shaped like a snowflake. Earlier, Bai Wanjian was seen pulling his sword out and putting it back within the blink of an eye, so no one would have thought that he had already stabbed the pillar six times. Since each snowflake-shaped stab was made

by the movement of the wrist, the speed needed to achieve this was really incomparable indeed.

When Wang Wanren was thrown back by Shi Potian's internal strength earlier, the men in the hall had already begun to dismiss the abilities of the Snow Mountain School. However, some of them could not help but become filled with a measure of respect for the school after Bai Wanjian's exquisite display of the swordplay technique that was rarely seen and heard even within the martial arts circle itself. Others simply showed their appreciation with loud cheers.

Bai Wanjian raised his clasped fists and said, "Friends, I do not know how many among you are actually better than I when it comes to the use of weaponry. How then would I dare to act like the one who shows off his skill with the axe before Lu Ban the master carpenter, and display my measly skills before a gathering of experts? How would I dare to come to the headquarters of your esteemed clan and act as audaciously as I please? However, there is a matter for which I seek your witness. Seven years ago, our school had a good-for-nothing disciple called Shi Zhongyu. He was so bold and reckless that he fought with my Younger Uncle-at-Arms Liao. Consequently, Uncle Liao stabbed him six times on his left thigh as a lesson, each stroke creating a snowflake-shaped mark. While the swordplay techniques of our school are mediocre and unamazing, there is no swordplay technique from any other school that can leave such scars."

At this point, he turned and glared at Shi Potian. Then, he continued darkly: "Shi Zhongyu, you have deceived everyone here because you do not dare to reveal your true identity. Can you pull your trouser-leg up and show these friends if there are such scars on your thigh? The truth will then be differentiated from falsehood with just one look."

"You want me to pull my trouser-leg up and let everyone take a look?" asked Shi Potian in surprise.

"That is correct," answered Bai Wanjian. "If there are no such scars on your thigh, I will acknowledge that my eyes were blind. Then, I will bow before the Clan-Leader in apology for harrasing your esteemed organisation. But if there really are these scars on your thigh, what ... what then?"

Shi Potian laughed. "If there really are six sword-inflicted scars on my thigh,"

he said, "that would be very strange. Why would I not know about it at all?"

Bai Wanjian, who had been keeping his eyes fixed on Shi Potian, found a chestful of self-confidence in the way the young man spoke. Therefore, he (Bai) could not help but mumble in his heart: This fellow is definitely the rascal Shi Zhongyu. Although his appearance has changed with adulthood and the way he carries himself is quite different from what it was several years ago, his facial features have remained the same. Sister Hua insisted that he is the one after she slipped into this place for a look, so all of us could not have been mistaken, could we? Hence, he did not respond to Shi Potian at all.

Meanwhile, Chen Zhongzhi laughed and said, "You want to see the scars on our Clan-Leader's thigh, but our Clan-Leader wants to see the scar on your Hua-guniang's thigh. There are many people here, so it is not an appropriate place for bare bodies. Perhaps we should just allow both of them to go into an inner room together. Then, you can look at me, I can look at you, everyone can take a close and careful look at one another!"

The men of the Clan of Eternal Happiness burst into such loud and side-splitting laughter that the tiles on the roof rattled and shook.

Bai Wanjian was terribly furious, yet he simply cursed the people in a low voice: "Shameless!" Then, he turned and stood right in the centre of the hall. "Shi Zhongyu," he roared, "you have a conscience that is as guilty as a thief's, so you are unwilling to show us the scars on your thigh. In that case, you had better follow me to Lingxiao City to bring the matter to an end!" A *shua* sounded, and his sword was in his hand.

"Master Bai, why do you need to be angry?" asked Shi Potian. "You say that there are scars on my thigh, but I say that there are none. We will all take a look, so what is there to be anxious about?" As he spoke, he raised his left leg and placed it on the arm of the tigerskin-draped chair. Then, he pulled the trouser-leg up so that his skin was exposed.

The hall fell silent at once.

Suddenly, everyone gasped in shock. There were six dots on the outer side of his left thigh, with each dot having six points of its own. Although the marks on the young man's skin were not as distinct as those on the pillar, their hexagonal

shapes were clearly discernable.

The one who had the greatest shock of all was none other than Shi Potian himself. He reached out and gave the six scars a vigorous rub, only to find that they were indeed part of his thigh. They were not forgeries at all. He rubbed his eyes and looked again, yet the six scars on his thigh were exactly the same as the ones on the pillar. As the eighteen eyeballs on the nine disciples of the Snow Mountain School glared coldly at him, Shi Potian rubbed the left leg of his trousers and touched his shoulder. With sweat dripping from his brow, he mumbled: "The shoulder and the thigh are all scarred. Why do other people know about them, but I do not? Could I ... could I have forgotten everything that has happened before?"

He looked at Bei Haishi, only to see the latter shaking his head slowly in response. Then, he turned to Ding Dang. Ding Dang screwed her nose up, gave him a smile and made a funny face. Finally, he looked at Ding Busan. The old man pointed his index and middle fingers forward into the crowd, indicating that he should turn to force and start killing people.

* In some editions, the "previous Clan-Leader" was surnamed Dongfang.

Definitions, explanations and/or words left (mostly) in their original form:

Those covered in earlier chapters are not repeated.

1. *Untie [one's] shirt* = *In those days, shirts had front openings that were closed with short fabric ties. Buttons were not used widely by the Han-Chinese until the Qing Dynasty came into power and brought their style of dressing to the masses.*

2. *Dog-bear coward (gou3 xiong2)* = *This is a play on words with similar sounds. Since a brave/hero is known as 'ying xiong' (ying1 xiong2), a rhyming albeit slightly derogative term for its opposite, the coward, is taken from the Chinese word for "black bear" (gou3 xiong2). The character "gou3" alone also means "dog", which is another oft-used derogative for people in Chinese culture. I have chosen to translate "gou3 xiong2" as the somewhat redundant*

"dog-bear coward" instead of the simpler "coward" to preserve the uniqueness of this play on words.

3. Moon-gate (yue4 dong4 men2) = This is large circular opening in a wall that is characteristic of Chinese architecture.

4. Wing-room (xiang1 fang2) = In those days, houses were built with wings, usually one each to the east and the west of the main building. Rooms in these wings were known as "wing-rooms".

5. Jiao-ke (jiao1 ke4) = Son-in-law. It can also mean 'pampered guest'.

6. Pan Gu created the Heaven and the Earth = This is in accordance to the Chinese legend of creation and life.

7. Gu-ye, Xiao-jie (gu1 ye3, xiao3 jie3) = These are terms of address used by the servants of a young woman for the woman and her husband. The woman is known as 'xiao-jie' or 'young mistress', while her husband is known as 'gu-ye' or roughly, 'husband of the young mistress'.

8. The third watch = between 11.00 p.m. and 1.00 a.m.

Chapter 7 - The Swordplay Technique of the Snow Mountain School

Shi Potian smiled and said, "You are short of one person, so you cannot compete with your swords. Let me join hands with Master Bai just for the fun of it. But I do not know what to do, so please give me some pointers."

Chen Chongzhi took a sword in both his hands and presented it horizontally to Shi Potian, whispering: "Clan-Leader, there is no need to engage them in further talk. Just settle the matter once and for all with force, for the victor will then be correct, and the vanquished wrong." Despite finding Bai Wanjian's swordplay skills superb, he suspected that the man's internal strength would definitely be beneath his clan-leader's. Since Bai's evidence was rather conclusive, the best way to end the matter would be through the use of martial arts. Even if in the unlikely event that the clan-leader succumbed to the enemy, the numerous members of the Clan of Eternal Happiness would certainly ensure that all of the offensive visitors were wiped out.

Shi Potian took the sword from Chen Chongzhi without much thought, for his mind was completely perplexed.

"Shi Zhongyu, listen up!" said Bai Wanjian in a stern voice. "I, Bai Wanjian, have come on the command of our leader, the Gentlemen of Impressive Strength and Virtue, to restore order to our institution. This is an internal matter of the Snow Mountain School, so it has nothing to do with anyone else. If it is inappropriate to settle the matter in the headquarters of the Clan of Eternal Happiness, what say you if we do it outside?"

"Set ... settle what?" asked Shi Potian, his mind still in a daze.

Ding Dang gave him a light push on the back and whispered: "Go and fight with him. Your martial arts skills are way much better than his, so you can just have him killed."

"I ... I do not want to kill him," said Shi Potian. "Why would I? Master Bai is not a bad man." As he spoke, he took two steps forward.

Bai Wanjian did not dare to have the slightest bit of negligence in his response,

for he had seen how badly the young man wounded Wang Wanren with a simple wave of his sleeves. After all, he thought, the rascal had probably had an amazing encounter with the opportunity to develop such a profound level of internal strength after he left Lingxiao City. If that was the case, the young man would probably possess extraordinary skills in other areas of pugilistic practice as well. Therefore, Bai Wanjian gave his sword a shake and attacked Shi Potian from four sides and eight directions with a stroke that was known as 'The Plum and the Snow Fight for Spring' (Mei² Xue³ Zheng¹ Chun¹). This stroke, which had concrete movements within those that mocked the opponent, as well as mocking ones within the concrete, made simultaneous use of the tip and the blade of the sword as flecks of snow and branches of the plum-tree respectively.

To Shi Potian, there was a sudden flash of white light before eyes, a light so bright that he could hardly tell the tip of the sword from the blade. In a moment of great fear and confusion, he waved his sleeves wildly once more. Yet, his possession of such a profound level of internal strength was a waste, for he did not know how to use it at all. The act of throwing Wang Wanren away earlier was nothing more than a stroke of sheer coincidence. Now, his wild waving was comparatively weaker. Coupled with Bai Wanjian's abilities being far better than Wang Wanren's, all that happened were two ripping sounds as his sleeves were cut away by Bai's sword, followed by the touch of cold metal on his neck. The tip of the sword was pointed at his throat.

Bai Wanjian knew that his opponents included highly-skilled pugilists that were as numerous as the clouds in the sky. Bei Haishi's skills were definitely not beneath his own, while the old man standing behind Shi Potian had such crystal-clear eyes that he too was probably a formidable pugilist. He (Bai) was in a dangerous place indeed, so how could he give his opponents space and time to act?

Having achieved his goal in a single stroke, Bai Wanjian took two quick steps forward and held Shi Potian under the ribs with his left arm. Then, he exerted his strength and pressed his arm against two different acupoints on Shi Potian's waist. "Friends," he declared in a loud voice, "I have offended you today, but I will return to offer my apologies!"

The sight of Bai's success spurred Ke Wanjun into action at once. Lifting Wang

Wanren up without waiting for instructions from his elder brother-at-arms, he began moving quickly towards the main door.

"Release our Clan-Leader!" shouted Chen Chongzhi and Mi Hengye in unison as they drew their sabre and sword. Then, with the sabre aiming for the shoulder and the sword for the legs, the duo attacked Bai Wanjian.

Bai's sword responded with a tremble, and deflected the sabre and sword one after the other. Although the two weapons were fended off in sequence, the difference between the two actions was but only an instant. Yet, Bai could feel that the internal strength exerted through the sabre was not weak. He thought: These two men are already such formidable pugilists, so if all the highly-skilled men of the Clan of Eternal Happiness launched a simultaneous attack, the nine of us will certainly die here. Hence, he moved quickly and stood against a wall. "If anyone comes up," he shouted, "I would have to kill Shi Zhongyu first before dealing with all of you."

The men of the Clan of Eternal Happiness did not expect their clan-leader to be captured within a single stroke, at least not with the kind of skills he possessed. Therefore, they could not help but be at a loss on what to do next. Ding Dang, who had panic written all over her face, kept gesturing towards Ding Busan in an effort to get him to act. But the old man simply laughed things off: That young fellow is highly skilled in martial arts. He deflected my palm effortlessly on the little boat, so how could he be captured with such ease? There must be an agenda behind this move, so why should I push ahead and spoil his plans? Let me just enjoy the excitement first.

When Ding Dang saw the grin on her grandfather's face and his lack of concern over the Shi Potian's capture, relief began to enter her heart. However, she remained rather worried because her man was in the hands of the enemy.

By then, Ke Wanjun had already placed his hands on the main door, exerting his internal strength through them in order to push the door open. The wooden poles that propped the door up from the other side creaked loudly, indicating that the door was about to open soon.

"My friend Ke, you do not need to be so impatient," said Bei Haishi, moving sideways towards him. "Let me get someone to open the door and see you out."

"Move away!" shouted Hua Wanzi, brandishing her sword as she guarded Ke Wanjun's back.

Bei Haishi reached out and made a grab for the blade with his fingers.

Hua Wanzi was shocked: Is his palm not afraid of the sharp edge?

Yet, it was this very moment of distraction that cost the woman her weapon, for just as Bei Haishi's fingers came within several cun (1 cun = 3.33 centimetres) of the blade, he suddenly flicked them. A *weng* was heard. Hua Wanzi lost her grip on the sword, causing it to fall out of her hand and drop on to the ground below. Then, almost at once, Bei's right hand reached out and struck Hua on the shoulder. These two movements, akin to the falcon swooping down on the hare, were so swift that they were not beneath the speed with which Bai Wanjian had left the six marks on the pillar earlier.

Ding Busan nodded silently: The Physician Bei does indeed have some true abilities for his 'Palm Technique of the Five Elements and the Six Directions' to be so renowned in the martial arts circle.

By then, Bei Haishi was moving lightly from one side of the hall to the other, flicking a finger here and striking with a palm there, as he fell the disciples of the Snow Mountain School one by one. Each of them managed to exchange a mere three to four strokes at the most with the physician before they were struck down.

"Good skills!" said Bai Wanjian loudly. "Good Palm Technique of the Five Elements and the Six Directions! I will certainly return to seek your advice some day!" Then, quite unexpectedly, Bai flew upwards and crashed through the roof, taking Shi Potian with him as he made his escape.

"Why do you not get your advice today?" shouted Bei Haishi after him as he leapt upwards and through the hole in the roof in pursuit. A blinding light flashed, as if ten thousand snowflakes had suddenly started to fall from the ceiling. With his body in mid-air and no weapons in his hands, Bei Haishi could hardly fend off any blows that came his way. Therefore, he executed a 'Fall of a Thousand Jin' (Qian1 Jin1 Zhui4) (1,000 jin = 500 kilogrammes) at once and forced himself to drop straight back down to the ground. The move looked rather ordinary and unamazing, but it was actually quite a feat to turn such a

strong upward momentum into a downward force in the twinkling of an eye. If he had made any mistake, he would have been struck by the enemy's sword. Thus, all the highly-skilled pugilists in the hall who had witnessed the display found themselves applauding it deep in their hearts.

For Bai Wanjian, the move was all he needed to escape with Shi Potian.

Bei Haishi bounced on his toes and went through the roof again in pursuit.

Ding Dang became so worried that she too wanted to go off through the hole in the roof, but Ding Busan grabbed her by the arm and whispered: "There is no hurry!" Just then, they heard a series of *peng-peng pai-pai* coming from above their heads, followed by pieces of tile and mud falling down into the hall through the hole.

Suddenly, a thin and small-sized man leapt up from among the eight Snow Mountain disciples who were lying on the ground. Moving as fast as the leopard cat and as agile as the monkey, he headed for the hole in the roof. Chen Chongzhi executed a back-hand stroke with his sabre and sliced the sole off one of escaping man's shoes, missing his foot by only a cun (3.33 centimetres).

The men of the Clan of Eternal Happiness were momentarily stunned, for they did not expect the Snow Mountain School to have another highly-skilled pugilist besides Bai Wanjian. After all, the thin and small-sized man had managed to get away even after being struck down by Bei Haishi.

Deeply concerned that the remaining seven might escape, Mi Hengye went up to each of them and struck them several times on various acupoints. By then, more than ten clan-members had already set off through the hole in pursuit of the escapees with a variety of weapons among them. They thought: These people bullied us right on our doorsteps and seized our Clan-Leader. If we do not capture them, where will the Clan of Eternal Happiness stand in the realm of the rivers and lakes? We already have seven of them, but even seventy and seven hundred of them are insufficient to compensate for the humiliation of having our Clan-Leader seized.

In addition, they thought: So long as we can detain the one surnamed Bai and exchange two or three strokes with him, all the brothers can go forth together and rescue our Clan-Leader. That would be a great act of merit indeed.

Hence, the men gathered up their courage and began to head out in different directions. The area around the headquarters of the Clan of Eternal Happiness was soon filled with noisy shouts and whistles as more and more clan-members came out in pursuit.

+ + +

Bai Wanjian could hardly believe that he had actually seized Shi Potian in a single move. Thus, after breaking through the roof and escaping from the Clan of Eternal Happiness, he thought: I am ashamed of myself! Then, as the din of pursuit grew behind him, he quickly realised that he would never be able to go very far with a captive in tow. Looking around, he saw an arched bridge over the river on his west. Since he did not have the time to give the matter further thought, he simply ducked under the arch of the bridge with Shi Potian, stood on the base of one of its pillars and pressed himself flat against the body of bridge itself.

A short while later, the men of the Clan of Eternal Happiness arrived on the southern bank of the river, and began walking up and down amidst shouts and whistles. Seven or eight of them ran over the arched bridge, crossing from its southern end to the northern one.

By then, Bai Wanjian had already made a decision: If the enemy finds my trail, I would probably have to kill the young fellow first. A moment later, he heard the arrival of yet another group of pursuers from the Clan of Eternal Happiness, this time searching the river along its bank.

Suddenly, a loud *la* sounded from a clump of grass by the bank. Then, someone was heard running off into the east. Bai Wanjian was delighted, for he could tell from the footfalls that the person was his younger brother-at-arms, Wang Wanyi. Wang Wanyi's qinggong was considered the best in the Snow Mountain School, for he could run so fast that he almost seem to fly. Bai Wanjian knew that Wang Wanyi had come to lead the pursuers away, so that he (Bai) could seize the opportunity to escape from danger.

Sure enough, the men of the Clan of Eternal Happiness made a bee-line for Wang.

Bai Wanjian thought: There are quite a number of brilliant and knowledgeable

individuals in the Clan of Eternal Happiness, so how can we think that they would give me the opportunity to escape with ease? As he hesitated about his next move, he heard the sounds of sculls (oars used to propel boats from their sterns) breaking through the water. Three open boats came sailing by from the east. Two of them carried melons and vegetables, while the third was fully loaded with rice-straw. The villagers in the vicinity were taking their produce to Zhenjiang City for sale.

Sailing nose-to-tail, the three boats passed under the arch of the bridge. Bai Wanjian was delighted. When the last boat passed in front of him, he jumped forward and landed on the straw with Shi Potian in tow. The pile of straw was so high that it nearly touched the top of the arch, so the villagers on the boat did not realise that two people had landed lightly on it. As Bai sank into the pile of straw, he pulled Shi Potian with him and tunnelled out of sight.

The boat sailed until it reached the firewood market before pulling up to the bank and dropping anchor. The villagers on the boat hopped ashore and headed to the teahouse for some tea.

Bai Wanjian popped his head out of the straw and looked around. Seeing no one nearby, he leapt ashore with Shi Potian at once. When he noticed a boat with a dark-coloured shelter on the western side of the wharf, he went over to it immediately and put a foot on its bow. Then, he took out a piece of silver that weighed three liang (150 grammes) and tossed it on to the deck. "Boatman," he said, "my friend here is very ill. Take us to Yangzhou quickly. This ingot of silver is the fare. You need not find us change for it."

The sight of such a large piece of silver brought the boatman so much joy that he uttered his agreement to take Bai Wanjian to his destination several times. Then, he took up a pole and pushed the boat away from the wharf. The boat took several turns and soon entered a canal for its journey to the north.

Bai Wanjian sat hidden in the cabin of the boat. He knew that the Clan of Eternal Happiness was so powerful in the area that the men of the clan would come running as soon as the slightest bit of information was leaked. Bai Wanjian weighed the situation he had on hand: I am fortunate to capture the rascal Shi Zhongyu, but seven of my siblings-at-arms are now in danger at the Clan of Eternal Happiness. How am I going to rescue them?

Besides the mixed emotions of gladness and anxiety in his heart, he also felt rather afraid, for he was concerned that Shi Potian would use pretence in an attempt to escape. Therefore, he struck the young man on several acupoints at intervals that were less than the time it took to brew a pot of tea (about once every 15 minutes). By the time the boat entered the Long River (Chang² Jiang¹) (1), Shi Potian had already had forty to fifty different acupoints on his body sealed by Ban Wanjian.

By and by, Bai said, "Boatman, just keep on sailing downstream. Here is another five liang (250 grammes) of silver."

The boatman was overjoyed. "Thank you for your great generosity, sir," he said. "My boat is too small for the winds and waves in the middle of the river. But if we sail close to the shore, we would still be able to carry on."

"It is best if we sail downstream along the southern bank," said Bai Wanjian.

After travelling for more than twenty li (10 km), Bai saw a small yellow-walled temple on the shore. He stood on the bow at once and gave a loud whistle. A whistle from the temple answered him soon after that. "Pull in to the shore," Bai said. However, by the time the boatman steered the little vessel to the bank of the river, put away the steering pole and began taking out the gangplank, Bai Wanjian had already leapt ashore with Shi Potian.

A moment later, more than ten people came running out of the temple towards Bai. Shouting happily, they turned out to be a second group of disciples from the Snow Mountain School who had been sent to intercept the earlier one. When they saw the brocade-dressed young man in Bai's grasp, they said, "Elder Brother Bai, this is"

Bai Wanjian responded by throwing Shi Potian heavily on to the ground. "Brothers," he said in indignation, "I have been fortunate to succeed in my mission, for I have captured the chief culprit at last. Do you not recognise him at all?"

When the men looked at Shi Potian again, they saw someone who vaguely resembled Shi Zhongyu, the unruly young man who escaped from Lingxiao City years ago. Consequently, the men became so angry that some began to kick him. Others spat on him. Then, an older disciple said, "We had better not injure him.

Brother Bai has seized victory the moment his battle-steed arrived, for he has succeeded in his mission as soon as he came to this place. It is indeed an occasion of great joy and celebration."

However, Bai Wanjian shook his head. "Although I have captured the rascal," he said, "I have left seven siblings-at-arms danger. The loss actually outweighs the gain."

As they spoke, the men made their way back to the small temple. Two of the Snow Mountain disciples picked Shi Potian up between them and followed the others indoors as well.

The temple had once housed the village god, but now it lay in ruins. There were no longer any monks or attendants there. Due to the isolated location of the temple and the absence of passers-by, the disciples of the Snow Mountain School decided to use the place for shelter and contact.

When Bai Wanjian entered the temple, his younger brothers-at-arms served him a meal of rice and vegetables so that he could eat before the group discussed its next move. Yet the discussion was only an activity in name, for there was already a well-thoughtout plan in Bai's mind. Once this plan was laid out, the men would naturally do their very best to carry it out.

"We must send the rascal to Lingxiao City as quickly as possible," said Bai Wanjian, "and hand him over to the School-Leader, so that he can be dealt with. Seven of our siblings-at-arms are in the hands of the enemy, but I think the Clan of Eternal Happiness will not dare to do them any harm because we have the clan-leader with us. Brother Zhang, Brother Wang(2) and Brother Zhao are all southerners, so they will remain in Zhenjiang City, disguise themselves and gather information."

Zhang, Wang and Zhao agreed.

Bai Wanjian went on: "Brother Wang Wanyi is very intelligent and resourceful. Once the three of you make contact with him, listen to all his instructions. Do not think that you can act like big brothers just because you joined the school before he did, and eventually spoil our larger plans."

Zhang, Wang and Zhao had always held their Elder Brother Bai in considerable awe, so they voiced their agreement several times.

"We will wait here until it is dark," said Bai Wanjian. "Then, we will travel east until Jiangyin before crossing the Long River. This round-about way back to Lingxiao City will mean a longer journey, but the Clan of Eternal Happiness would never think that we have chosen such a route. In fact, they would have gone all the way to the north of the River in pursuit of us by now." He dreaded the Clan of Eternal Happiness, and did nothing to hide it when he spoke.

Then, after checking through the temple and its surroundings, Bai and his siblings-at-arms gathered for another discussion. Sighing, Bai said, "Our trip to the Central Region has enabled us to burn Xuansu Manor down and capture the rebellious Shi Zhongyu, but Brothers Sun and Zhu died unnatural deaths. Furthermore, Brother Geng and the others are now in the hands of the enemy. This has really reduced the spirit and morale of our school by a great extent. In the final analysis, it is still my fault for poor leadership."

Huyan Wanshan, the oldest in age among the men, spoke up: "Brother Bai, you need not blame yourself for these unfortunate events. The real reason for the poor show is the lack of accomplishment in our practice of martial arts. All of us received the same instructions from our teacher, but except for Brothers Bai and Feng, we have managed to only scratch the surface of our teacher's pugilistic knowledge. We have not learnt the essence of our school's skills."

Another disciple, a plump fellow named Wen Wanfu, said, "When we compete against one another in Lingxiao City, we come away thinking that we have amazing skills. We never thought that the opposite would be true once we go out. Brother Bai, since we have nothing to do while we wait for darkness to fall, please give us some pointers on our moves."

When the other disciples voiced their agreement, Bai Wanjian replied: "When Father passes his pugilistic skills on to all of you, he does it without the slightest bit of favouritism. He teaches everyone exactly the same things. Look at Brother Feng. He practises more diligently than I, so his accomplishments are greater than mine."

"Everyone knows that Teacher does not show any favouritism at all," said Wen Wanfu. "However, we regret our gross dim-wittedness that stops us from understanding the secrets of success."

Bai Wanjian replied: "Since our journey back to Lingxiao City may not necessarily be peaceful or uneventful, every additional swordplay move learnt would lead to a measure of increase in our strength. Brother Huyan, Brother Wen, go ahead and exchange some moves. Brother Zhao, Brother Wang, go outside and keep watch. If you notice any enemy activity, sound the alarm at once."

Zhao and Wang were rather reluctant to go outside because they would miss the opportunity of seeing their Elder Brother Bai give pointers on swordplay moves. However, they did not dare to disobey Bai's instructions, so they hurried outside to their posts.

Meanwhile, Huyan Wanshan and Wen Wanfu stirred themselves, took their swords up and stood facing each other. Wen Wanfu, who stood in the position of lower priority (xia4 shou3), said, "Elder Brother Huyan, after you!"

Huyan Wanshan turned the hilt of the sword away and raised his clasps fists towards Bai Wanjian. "Elder Brother Bai, please instruct us," he said.

As Bai Wanjian acknowledged the request with a nod, Huyan Wanshan turned the top of his sword upwards in a sudden move and sent it sideways towards Wen Wanfu's left shoulder. It was none other than 'The Mature Branch Slashes Violently' (Lao3 Zhi1 Heng2 Xie2), one of the strokes in the swordplay techniques of the Snow Mountain School.

These swordplay techniques were created as a set by the founder of the school, who loved the plum-blossoms that grew in profusion both inside and outside Lingxiao City. Consequently, he had incorporated a number of simple but graceful movements into the swordplay techniques to depict the shapes of the flowers, sepals, branches and trunks of the plum-blossom tree.

The branches and trunks were prized for their withered appearance, while the flowers and sepals were valued for their dense multi-layered growth. Therefore, when the swords of Huyan Wanshan and Wen Wanfu engaged each other in battle, their movements were sometimes simple and unsophisticated, and sometimes complex and impenetrable. When the men swapped for a particular technique from the set for another, the form of snowflakes flying and dancing in the air could be seen. At the same time, the power of the howling north winds

could be felt. The swiftness of the men's strikes was akin to the wind-swept swaying of the plum-blossom tree. Periodically, the churning sands of the vast deserts of the north-west, as well as the furious galloping of camels and horses, could also be seen in the movements of the men's bodies.

By then, Shi Potian had been cast aside, for no one bothered to pay him any further attention. Terribly bored, he began to watch Huyan Wanshan and Wen Wanfu as they practised their swordplay skills. Although Shi's internal strength had reached a consummate level, he knew nothing about fist or sword techniques. Therefore, he did not understand the principles and the ingenuity behind the attacking, defending, advancing and retreating moves that the two men made with their swords. All he saw was only the urgency of the duel, which he watched with considerable relish.

After a while, Shi Potian found the men's swords stabbing to and fro as if they were at play. Each sword could clearly be sent a little further forward to stab the opponent, but it seemed to come to a sudden stop whenever the opportunity presented itself. Then, the sword would simply fall short of success, as if there was a lack of a final effort. Shi Potian thought: The men are brothers-at-arms who are just practising their swordplay skills. They do not really want to kill each other, so they would naturally not complete their moves.

Suddenly, Bai Wanjian shouted: "Stop!" Walking slowly towards the middle of the hall, he took the sword from Huyan Wanshan's hand and struck up a pose. "All this stroke needs to seize victory is a forward move of about two cun (6.66 centimetres)," he said.

"Yes!" said Shi Potian. "Master Bai is right. All this stroke needs to seize victory is a forward move of about two cun. Why does that Master Huyan not deliberately push the sword forward?"

Huyan Wanshan nodded. "Elder Brother Bai, your advice is correct," he said. "However, when my 'Boundless Sand-Storm' (Feng1 Sha1 Mang3 Mang3) reaches this particular point, my internal strength is exhausted. So I do not have any means to push forward even by half a cun (1.67 centimetres)."

"The cultivation of internal strength is not achieved within a day and a night," said Bai Wanjian with a smile. "However, the lack of internal strength can be

remedied with variations in one's swordplay moves. To be honest, the key to the internal strength cultivation techniques of our school may not necessarily contain anything remarkable. While we can say that the techniques of the various pugilistic schools have their respective advantages, the relatively short period of time that has passed since the establishment of the Snow Mountain School probably puts us at a disadvantage, compared to the centuries of experience that the Great Schools of Shaolin, Wudang, E-mei and Kunlun have accumulated. However, the uniqueness of our swordplay techniques can truly be considered unparalleled within the four seas. Brothers, when you face the enemy, you must play our strengths against the enemy's weaknesses. Do not enter into duels of internal strength; instead, make every effort to seize victory through the exquisite and subtle variations of our swordplay techniques."

Nodding their heads in unison, Bai's younger brothers-at-arms thought: Elder Brother Bai's words have identified the most important points of our swordplay techniques.

When the owner of Lingxiao City and the leader of the Snow Mountain School, the Gentleman of Impressive Strength and Virtue Bai Zizai, was young, he had the good fortune to consume a miraculous medicinal concoction that resulted in a sudden increase in his internal strength. The increase was so great that it was equivalent to fifty to sixty years of practice and cultivation by an ordinary man. Consequently, the level of Bai Zizai's internal strength exceeded those of highly-skilled pugilists from Shaolin and Wudang despite the ordinary and unremarkable techniques of internal strength cultivation used by the Snow Mountain School. Since the extraordinary medicinal concoction that Bai Zizai consumed could only be found by a sheer stroke of luck, his own disciples had ended up terribly short-changed in the crucial area of internal strength. Yet, the Gentleman of Impressive Strength and Virtue was so anxious to excel and outdo others that he never told his disciples about the weaknesses of their school. Hence, as the Snow Mountain School isolated itself in Lingxiao City and built its own kingdom, the disciples came to believe that both the internal and external techniques of their school were peerless ... until they arrived in the Central Region and suffered one setback after another. It was only after Bai Wanjian's plain and truthful explanation that these disciples finally understood their lot.

Bai Wanjian went on to demonstrate and explain each of the exquisite variations in their swordplay techniques. When Huyan Wanshan and Wen Wanfu were done exchanging strokes with each other, they were replaced by another pair of disciples. Then, Bai sent Huyan and Wen to relieve Zhao and Wang, who had been on guard-duty outside.

The men's recent experiences had given them a heartfelt understanding of what it meant to use the sword: that the difference between life and death was found in but a single stroke that was not executed to the highest level in terms of skill and completeness. Therefore, none of them wavered in their focus and concentration as they began to train themselves, for they were no longer being diligent merely for the sake of practising like they once did in Lingxiao City.

The strokes that the men used as they trained with one another were almost all alike. With Bai Wanjian's continuous explanations, the intelligent Shi Potian had developed a rough grasp of all seventy-two strokes found in the swordplay techniques of the Snow Mountain School by the time the seventh pair of disciples took to the floor. Although he did not understand or remember the meanings of the names of the strokes, or comprehend all the exquisite variations found in them, he could already visualise how he could fend off an opponent's oncoming sword and launch a counter-attack. These visualisations also fitted accurately into the main ideas behind the swordplay techniques of the Snow Mountain School.

With everyone's attention focused on learning, the active learners soon forgot about their tiredness and fatigue, while the observers did not feel hungry at all. This went on until all eighteen of the Snow Mountain disciples had had their lessons. By then, with the set of swordplay techniques demonstrated nine times by nine different pairs of disciples, Shi Potian had already memorised six-to seven-tenths of the entire routine.

Suddenly, a loud crash was heard. Bai Wanjian had thrown his sword on to the ground. As he let out a heavy sigh, his brothers-at-arms looked at one another in dismay, for they did not know what he intended to do. As they watched, his eyes turned towards Shi Potian, who was lying on the floor. "After this rascal entered our school," he said gloomily, "he understood the essence of our pugilistic arts within two or three short years. While his finesse in executing the techniques

could not be compared with those of our uncles-at-arms who have had ten or twenty years of training, there was already a significant accomplishment in terms of flexibility and variation. The swordplay techniques of our school place a premium on agility and flexibility, so Elder Brother Feng was proud to have such a student. In addition, the leader of our school viewed him with favour and harboured hopes that he would bring glory to the school. Sigh ... sigh ... sigh ..."

Regret could clearly be seen on his face as he sighed thrice.

The Frost of the North-West Bai Wanjian was not only highly skilled in martial arts; he was also above most in terms of knowledge and insight. After spending half the day instructing eighteen brothers-at-arms in swordplay, he realised that the men's progress were held back by their innate abilities. They could study diligently and practise as much as they wanted, but they would hardly achieve the heights that they desired. Consequently, the thought that the school would have no successors filled him with considerable regret.

Shi Zhongyu was initially a fine disciple -- a selection in a thousand, one might say -- yet, he wilfully chose not to be good.

By then, Bai Wanjian had become so absorbed in the swordplay techniques and their variations that he had momentarily forgotten about the sorrow of the school and the humiliation of his family. Thus, he could not help but feel a deep pain in his heart about Shi Zhongyu.

When Shi Potian noticed Bai Wanjian looking at him with such deep love and concern in his eyes, he could not help but respond with silent gratitude. He did not understand why Bai looked at him in that manner, of course.

The temple was enveloped in total silence.

A moment passed. Bai Wanjian gave the hilt of the sword on the ground a light tap with his right foot. The sword jumped up as if it were alive and leapt right into Bai's hand. Then, he walked calmly out into the centre courtyard and spoke in a loud voice: "Which men of achievements have arrived? Would you please come down and talk?"

The other disciples of the Snow Mountain School jumped with fright: Are the highly skilled men of the Clan of Eternal Happiness here? Huyan Wanshan and Wen Wanfu are standing guard outside, but why have they not raised the alarm?

The visitors have come in silence, but how did Elder Brother Bai know about them?

A gentle tap later, two other people stood in the courtyard. One was a man dressed entirely in black, while the other was a married woman in a white shirt and skirt. She had a red belt around her waist and a large red flower in her hair, obvious indications that she was not in mourning. Both of them carried long swords on their backs. The man's sword had a black tassel that fluttered in the wind, while the woman's had a white one. The visitors had touched the ground at the same time when they leapt down, producing only a single light thud when they landed. In addition to this particular display of ability, the visitors' valiant and heroic bearing had everyone taken by surprise.

Bai Wanjian turned his sword downwards and held his fists up in a clasp. "So Manor-Master Shi of Xuansu Manor and his wife have arrived," he said in a loud voice.

Indeed, the visitors who had leapt into the courtyard were none other than the master of Xuansu Manor, Shi Qing, and his wife, Min Rou.

A smile appeared on Shi Qing's face. Raising his clasped fists, he said, "When Brother Bai visited our manor, we were not at hand to welcome you. We are sorry for being unable to perform the duties of the host."

The Snow Mountain disciples who had met Shi Qing and his wife in Hou Jian Ji before, had all been captured by the Clan of Eternal Happiness, so no one in the current group knew who the couple was. When they heard that the Shis had actually arrived, they could not help but mumble in their hearts: We wonder if they know that we have already burnt their manor down.

Then, to the disciples' surprise, Bai Wanjian went straight to the point: "We initially travelled east from the Western Region in search of your son. When we could not find him, we burnt your manor down in a fit of anger."

The smile on Shi Qing's face did not fade away. "Our manor was not constructed well in the first place," he said. "Since you, Brother Bai, do not find it pleasant to the eye, you have had it burnt down on my behalf. That is very good, very good indeed! I must express my gratitude for the mercy that you have shown, for you chased everyone out of the manor before setting it on fire. Your

benevolence and kindness is evident because you did not even burn a chicken or a dog to death."

"The male and female servants at your manor have not done anything wrong," said Bai Wanjian, "so how would we dare to hurt anyone for no reason? How then could we bother you with the conveyance of your gratitude?"

"The virtuous men of the Snow Mountain School have always loved my son deeply," responded Shi Qing, "but I regret that the child has not learnt to be good. His wilfulness and defiance is a betrayal of the high expectations that Elder Bai, Brother Feng and Brother Bai have harboured for him. My wife and I are indebted to you, yet we are once again ashamed. Is Elder Bai well? Is Old Mrs Bai well?" At this point, Shi Qing and Min Rou bowed as if they were paying their respects to Bai Wanjian's parents in person.

Bai returned the gesture and replied, "My father is healthy and well, thank you. However, my mother is no longer in Lingxiao City because of your son." By then, his face had clouded over with worry.

"Old Mrs Bai possesses consummate skills in martial arts," said Shi Qing. "She enjoys high prestige among her peers and commands universal respect. Everyone in the realm of the rivers and lakes holds her in reverence because of the countless acts of philanthropy that she has performed in her life. Now that she has gone on a short trip to drive away the cares on her heart, she is certain to be healthy and well."

Bai Wanjian replied: "Thank you for your words of gold, Manor-Master Shi. May they be true. However, my mother is already advanced in years. As her son, I cannot help but worry as she braves the winds and frosts among the rivers and lakes."

"That, Brother Bai, is the mind of a filial man," said Shi Qing. "It is natural and normal in human relationships for children to be filial and obedient to their parents, and for parents to show concern for their children. When sons and daughters engage in preposterous and unworthy behaviours, their parents can only take them home with pain-filled hearts and administer firm discipline."

Now that the subject had been broached, Bai Wanjian said, "Manor-Master Shi, you and your wife are admired throughout the martial arts circle as valiant

heroes. I remember seeing a plaque in the main hall of Xuansu Manor that bore the words 'In Sharp Contrast' (Hei1 Bai2 Fen1 Ming2). This probably refers to your ability to make a clear distinction between right and wrong, as well as your strong sense of justice and chivalry, instead of merely standing for the power and prestige of the Twin Swords of Black and White in the realm of the rivers and lakes."

"That is correct," answered Shi Qing. "We really do not deserve to be commended about our sense of justice and chivalry. Since we are all pugilists, we should not be ambiguous on what is right and what is wrong. Yet, I wonder: where has the wooden plaque that bears the words 'In Sharp Contrast' gone?"

Bai Wanjian was taken aback for a moment, before making a calm response: "I have burnt it!"

"Very good!" said Shi Qing. "Our son entered the Snow Mountain School as a student, so if he violated the rules of the school, he should be dealt with by the elders of the school. These elders could have him beaten or killed without any questions from his parents, for this is one of the rules of the martial arts circle. When we last met in Hou Jian Ji, we handed our Twin Swords of Black and White over to your school. We also made it clear that we would take our son to Lingxiao City and exchange him for the swords. Now, did such an incident take place?"

After meeting up with Geng Wanzhong, Ke Wanjun and the others, Bai Wanjian had indeed heard about the matter. That day, after Geng and the others lost the twin swords, they had initially attributed the loss to a trick by Shi Qing and his wife. Then, after meeting and questioning a group of pathetic errand-runners and sedan-chair bearers who seemed to be fleeing from someone or something, they had found out that the occupants of the sedan-chair were actually an adult and a child. The descriptions of the duo and their clothes had indicated that they were none other than the Resident of the Skyscraping Cliff Xie Yanke and the little beggar. (Please refer to Chapter 2 for the details).

Bai Wanjian had long heard that Xie Yanke was very highly skilled in martial arts. Coupled with Xie's uncertain whereabouts, the task of retrieving the Twin Swords of Black and White was really a terribly difficult one. Now that Shi Qing

had brought the subject up, Bai could not help but turn slightly red. "That is correct," he said. "Your swords are not here at the moment. We will naturally make a special effort to return them another day."

Shi Qing laughed: "Brother Bai, your words have underestimated me by error. My wife and I are not particularly fastidious about being 'In Sharp Contrast'. You have already detained our son, but you have not released our weapons to us. So I wonder which rule in the martial arts circle that you are adhering to."

"What then do you think should be done, Manor-Master Shi?" asked Bai Wanjian.

"Once spoken, the words of a true man cannot be retrieved even by horses," answered Shi Qing. "If you want the child, you cannot have the swords. If you want the swords, you cannot have the child."

Bai Wanjian was actually a man who was worthy of his name. He valued trustworthiness and kept his promises, so he was really ashamed that the Twin Swords of Black and White had been lost while they were in the possession of his school. Since he had let Shi Qing down, he no longer had any logical reasons to engage in lame arguments. Yet, when he discussed the matter earlier with Geng Wanzhong and the others, they had talked about the possibility of Shi Qing being in cahoots with Xie Yanke. If that was the case, Shi Qing could have asked Xie Yanke to snatch the swords after they were given up. Furthermore, Shi Zhongyu had caused the death of his (Bai Wanjian's) only beloved daughter. Now that the great culprit had been captured, how could he be released simply on the word of another man?

Hence, Bai replied: "I am unable to make a decision on this matter by myself. Please forgive me, Manor-Master Shi. As for your swords, I will take it upon myself to ensure their safe return. If I am incompetent and unable to hand the Twin Swords of Black and White over, I will chop my head off in front of your manor as a gesture of apology." He spoke with enough determination to cut through nails and iron bars, so there was no leeway left for any alternative action.

Shi Qing knew that a man of Bai Wanjian's reputation would certainly keep his word, so he had to be believed when he said he would give his life up upon failing

to return the twin swords. Yet, Shi Qing could not just stand there and look helplessly at his only beloved son, who lay on the filthy dirt-covered ground. He had to rescue him regardless of what the issues were.

As for Min Rou, her eyes had not left Shi Potian from the moment she stepped into the hall. She had been separated from her beloved son for a long time, and now that they had met again in this strange place, she wanted to rush forward, sweep him up in her arms and hold him against her chest in a warm and loving embrace. In fact, tears were already rolling back and forth in her eyes, just short of spilling down her cheeks. Hence, regardless of what Bai Wanjian said, she did not hear a single thing.

However, she had always obeyed her husband's decisions, so she stood beside Shi Qing without uttering a single word during the entire time.

"Brother Bai, that is an overstatement!" said Shi Qing. "What value do our swords possess? How can they be mentioned in the same breath as your life that is worth ten thousand pieces of gold? But as people who roam the realm of the rivers and lakes, we know that most matters cannot depart from the word of reason. The swordplay techniques of the Snow Mountain School may be formidable and you may have many people here, but you still cannot take advantage of us. You cannot have the swords and the boy at the same time! Brother Bai, my wife and I want to take the boy away today."

As he uttered the last word, his left shoulder moved almost imperceptibly. It was a signal to his wife to unsheath her sword and attack the other party together with him.

In a flash of cold light, Shi Qing and Min Rou's swords were already on their way towards Bai Wanjian. When the swords were a chi (33.33 centimetres) away from Bai's chest, they came to an abrupt stop, as if they were being held back by a powerful force.

"After you, Brother Bai!" said Shi Qing, unwilling to launch a sneak attack on his opponent. If Bai Wanjian did not unsheath his sword and use it in defence, the couple's swords would not go forth either.

Eyeing the tips of the twin swords, Bai Wanjian took half a step forward.

The swords in Shi Qing and Min Rou's hands retreated, maintaining that single

chi of space between their tips and Bai's chest.

Then, Bai Wanjian slid a step backwards. When Shi Qing and his wife pushed their swords forward, two clangs were heard. Bai had unsheathed his sword in defence, causing all three blades to erupt in a flurry of movements. Shi Qing had originally used the Black Sword, but now, his sword was made of a type of blue steel that glistened and glowed with a greenish light. Hence, the clashes of the three swords filled the entire hall with an icy chill.

Meanwhile, the other disciples of the Snow Mountain School stood against the wall with their swords in hand, watching the battle with rapt attention. They had always been in awe of their Elder Brother Bai's swordplay skills, so despite the one-against-two situation, they were confident that he would triumph.

Initially, Shi Qing and Min Rou could be seen launching simultaneous attacks from different directions with exquisite movements and strokes. However, after sixty to seventy exchanges, the speed of their movements increased so much that the individual strokes could no longer be seen.

Bai Wanjian used the Swordplay Technique of the Snow Mountain School, which consisted of seventy-two moves. His fellow disciples were very familiar with these moves, so they found them ordinary and unamazing. However, when they were used by Bai in offence and defence against the exquisite skills of Shi Qing and Min Rou, these seemingly ordinary moves began to exude great power.

There was only a single candle with a dim flame in the hall of the temple, but the light that reflected off the three swords amidst the shadows of the pugilists was dazzlingly bright to the eye. The battle itself was fused with heart-stopping danger, for any move made with the slightest error would mean bloodshed in the hall.

While their swords reflected the light of the candle, the faces of the three pugilists were bathed alternately in darkness and light. Bai Wanjian appeared proud and aloof, while Shi Qing seemed amiable and at peace. As for Min Rou, she had not lost any of her usual warmth, elegance, gentleness and finesse. From these countenances alone, the three pugilists did not look any different from when they had met and exchanged greetings earlier. Yet, the vicious and ruthless moves they made with their swords were obvious indications that they

were battling one another with all they had.

+ + +

When Shi Qing and his wife entered the hall of the temple earlier, Shi Potian had recognised Min Rou as the kind-hearted woman who had given him some silver in Hou Jian Ji years ago. However, the couple had talked unceasingly with Bai Wanjian as soon as they had come inside. Then, they had unsheathed their swords and begun to fight. Therefore, Shi Potian had no opportunity to open his mouth and identify himself. As for the conversation that had taken place among the three, Shi Potian did not understand a single word of it at all. He could only gather that Shi Qing wanted Bai Wanjian to return two swords and a child of some sort. He knew what the Twin Swords of Black and White were, but it never crossed his mind that the subject of the three pugilists' contention was himself.

Having seen the eighteen disciples of the Snow Mountain School practise their swordplay skills earlier, Shi Potian assumed that the three pugilists had unsheathed their swords and begun fighting for the same purpose of polishing their skills. After all, the three did not exchange a single word of anger, blame or abuse. At the same time, their countenances were very calm.

By then, Shi Potian was already familiar with the 72-Stroke Swordplay Technique of the Snow Mountain School. The sight of Bai Wanjian executing these strokes with natural dexterity, vigour and viciousness brought him freedom of heart and ease of spirit.

After a while, he turned his attention to the techniques exhibited by Shi Qing and his wife. Almost at once, he realised that their moves were very different from each other's as well as that of Bai Wanjian. Shi Qing's moves alternated between being open and guarded, with all of them coming together in a tightly woven and very reliable set of techniques. On the other hand, Min Rou's moves flowed with the battle, for she used the sword as if it was a narrow length of fabric. Although Shi Qing's techniques were different from his wife's, their respective use of strength and grace, the Yang and the Yin, the linear and the non-linear, high and low speeds, as well as divergent methods of internal strength execution, complemented one another. Consequently, their techniques worked as one against the sword of Bai Wanjian.

Shi Qing and his wife were originally brother-and sister-at-arms during their days of pugilistic training at the Taoist Temple of Greater Clarity (Shang4 Qing1 Guan4). As their feelings for each other grew during this period, their mutual affinity began to show in their way they handled their swords. In the twenty-odd years of marriage that followed, there was never a day in which they were apart. Neither was there a day when they stopped practising their swordplay skills together. Therefore, they had already reached the point where each knew the intentions in the other's heart, as if the two were one. The knowledge of the Yin and the Yang, as well as the concepts of union and separation in swordplay, that Shi Qing and his wife possessed could not be matched by any other pair of pugilists in the martial arts circle.

Shi Potian did not understand this advanced principle of swordplay at all.

+ + +

The swordplay skills and internal strength that Shi Qing and his wife had were each comparable to Bai Wanjian's. Therefore, Bai would have crumbled under their combined onslaught, if not for the swiftness and ferocity of his swordplay skills. Furthermore, Min Rou was a gentle person by nature, so she often left a three-tenth leeway in the execution of her strokes. Consequently, the three pugilists could fight for a longer period of time.

But Min Rou's fragile and timid appearance belied her ability with the sword, for her skills were not beneath that of her husband's. Shortly after Bai Wanjian executed his seventieth stroke in the fight, he was almost slashed on two consecutive occasions by Min Rou's blade. He groaned inwardly, but he was so strong and unyielding by nature that he would rather die under the couple's swords than to admit defeat. As time went by, his offensive and defensive positions became increasingly disadvantaged.

A few of the disciples of Snow Mountain School soon noticed that something was wrong, so one of them called out: "You are fighting two against one. How unreasonable! Manor-Master Shi, if you have the guts, fight Elder Brother Bai alone. If you want to do in a group, we will all join in as well."

Shi Qing laughed. "Is the Dragon of Wind and Fire, Elder Brother Feng, here?" he asked. "If Brother Feng is here, he could join hands with Brother Bai. Then,

the four of us can have some fun in comparative swordplay." His words made things very clear: Except for Feng Wanli, the other disciples of the Snow Mountain School were not necessarily capable of partnering Bai Wanjian in the fight. With Bai as their only match at the moment, Shi Qing and his wife were in a position of great advantage. But if Bai took their only beloved son to Lingxiao City, how could the boy still continue living?

There were altogether almost twenty disciples from the Snow Mountain School in the temple. Shi Qing and his wife could each take ten of them on, because besides Bai Wanjian, the others were mediocre pugilists. Then again, who told the Snow Mountain School not to send more capable men out from their midst?

Meanwhile, Bai Wanjian became angry at Shi Qing's mention of Feng Wanli: Elder Brother Feng had an arm chopped off by Father merely because he had taken your devilish son in as his student, so how could you have the nerve to speak about him?

A highly skilled pugilist could not allow himself to be emotionally distracted during a fight. Bai Wanjian was already in a precarious position. Now that he had been angered, his execution of the stroke 'The Bright Camel with the Feet of a Fine Horse' (Ming² Tuo² Jun⁴ Zu³) was inevitably compromised.

Shi Qing saw the weakness in the move at once. Exercising his internal strength as he lifted his sword in defence, he caused Bai Wanjian's blade to adhere lightly to his own. Bai responded by sliding away in a quick burst of strength, but Min Rou's sword appeared between the two men's blades and headed directly for Bai's chest. All these moves happened within a lightning-fast instance in time.

Bai Wanjian closed his eyes, for he knew that the sword would pierce his heart. There was absolutely no way that he could fend it off.

To his surprise, Min Rou's sword came within half a chi (16.67 centimetres) of his chest before going into an immediate retraction. Then, the woman and her husband leapt away shoulder-to-shoulder before returning their swords to their respective scabbards without uttering a word at all.

Bai Wanjian opened his eyes. Turning pale, he thought: Their intention in sparing my life cannot be any clearer. They want to take their son away. I have

lost, so how could I pester them for another fight, and stop them from leaving? Even if we fought again, it would be difficult for a pair of fists to defeat four hands. I would not succeed in defeating the couple at all.

He thought about his beloved daughter, whose death was caused by the couple's son. He also thought about the team that he had led to the Central Region, of which seven members had been captured by the Clan of Eternal Happiness. He had managed to capture Shi Zhongyu in return, but now the captive was lost. He had regarded the Swordplay Technique of the Snow Mountain School with pride all his life, but after their failure to defeat the Twin Swords of Xuansu Manor, his own heroic reputation flowed away like the water in a stream.

In a twinkling, Bai Wanjian became so disheartened that he could only stand and stare blankly into space.

By then, Huyan Wanshan and Wen Wanfu had already heard about the goings-on and returned to the temple. When they saw how dejected their brother was, they said, "'They' are trying to overcome few with many, so can we not follow their example?"

Almost immediately, eighteen men raised their swords and attacked Shi Qing and Min Rou from all directions.

"Elder Brother Bai," said Shi Qing, "although I have gained the upper hand working together with my wife against you, victory and defeat have not been determined yet. Take this!" He raised his sword and sent it towards Bai Wanjian.

Bai had just had his life spared by his opponents, so in accordance to his status as a pugilist, he could not start another fight with the same opponents within such a short period of time. However, now that Shi Qing had sent his sword out on his own accord, Bai could actually make his defence. He thought: All right, I will fight you one-on-one to the death. Lifting his sword, he moved his body aside and struck out in response.

This fight between Bai Wanjian and Shi Qing was naturally different from the earlier one where Bai had gone against two opponents alone and found himself being pinned down repeatedly. Although he had been able to put up a very tight defence, he had had great difficulty launching suitable counter-attacks. Every

attack against Shi Qing at that time had to be guarded against raids by Min Rou, while every stab taken at Min Rou had to be accompanied by a corresponding stroke against Shi Qing.

Now, battling the opponent one-on-one, with a single sword against another, and reeling from the shame of his previous defeat, Bai Wanjian went all out as soon as he began and executed the 72-Stroke Swordplay Technique of the Snow Mountain School in incisive detail.

Shi Qing was shocked: The reputation of the Frost of the North-West is not undeserved. He is indeed a first-class swordsman of our time! Hence, Shi Qing stirred himself up and began to execute the skills that he had learnt throughout his life. He thought: It must be made known to you that the Swordplay Techniques of the Taoist Temple of Greater Clarity is not beneath those of the Snow Mountain School. I ordered my son to enrol as a student in your school for a deeper and more profound purpose. So you had better not indulge in false pride and think that Shi Qing is inferior to Bai Wanjian.

The fight between the two pugilists was truly a well-matched one. Bai Wanjian executed his strokes with violent swiftness and sent his sword everywhere, while Shi Qing moved with a rock-steady rhythm that underscored the rigour of his skills.

Failing to gain the upperhand after more than ten consecutive variations in technique, Bai Wanjian began to feel alarmed: The level of this man's swordplay skills is way beyond the reputation he enjoys, yet why did he order his son to enter our school as a student? Then, he thought: I could attribute my earlier defeat to the fact that two fists could not match four hands. Now that I am fighting one-on-one, another loss by even half a stroke would certainly cause the reputation of the Snow Mountain School to be dragged in dust. I must gain control over his vital points, for I cannot spare his life, or this terrible humiliation would hardly ever be avenged.

As the urgency to triumph increased in Bai's heart, the movements and strokes that he used became inevitably riskier.

Shi Qing was pleased: The greater your urgency to win, I am afraid the easier it will be for you to taste defeat in my hands.

More than ten strokes later, Bai Wanjian began to encounter one threatening response after another from his opponent. Thus warned, Bai re-focused his thoughts at once and returned to the right track of seeking early entry into each exchange instead of pushing urgently for attacks.

Only then could the two pugilists fight on equal footing, each no better or worse than the other.

+ + +

Watching the fight from the sidelines, Shi Potian became rather engrossed, despite being unable to understand the principles that underscored what he saw. Soon, even Shi Qing and Bai Wanjian hardly remembered the matters that each had on his shoulders. After two hundred strokes, Bai's spirits were so uplifted that he considered the fight one of the happiest events of his life. The earlier shame of being restrained by Min Rou with a single move of the sword had long been relegated to the recesses of his mind. On his part, Shi Qing was also very pleased with this formidable opponent.

Consequently, a feeling of mutual fondness began rising in each man's heart. As the animosity between them faded away and the desire to learn from each other grew, the men started using their most unique skills to see how their respective opponents would respond. When the fight first began, the *ding-ding dang-dang* of clashing weapons seemed to flow like a continuous string of sounds, but now, the *zheng-zheng* sounds of a sword hitting the other could be heard.

When the men finally reached their limits, Bai Wanjian executed a stroke called "The Hidden Incense Has a Dim Shadow" (An4 Xiang1 Shu1 Ying3) that slashed diagonally at his opponent without giving the latter a distinct view of the sword.

"Good technique!" said Shi Qing in a low but appreciative voice. He brought his blade into an upright position, and met Bai's oncoming sword.

The two men had exercised their internal strength for this move, so a loud *pa* sounded as soon as their weapons struck each other. Then, the blue steel sword in Shi Qing's hand snapped. Almost at once, another sword appeared on Shi's left. Taking the sword, the man executed a stroke called "Gaining an Advantage from the Left and the Right" (Zuo3 You4 Feng2 Yuan2), drawing the sword

across the front of his body in an arc from the left to the right to prevent his opponent from continuing with the attack.

Taking a step backwards, Bai Wanjian said, "This turn of events is due to the poor quality of your weapon, Manor-Master Shi. It is not an indication of victory and defeat in swordplay. If you had the Black Sword in your hands, could the treasured blade have snapped? I am still at fault."

Suddenly, Bai's countenance underwent a great change, for it was then that he realised that the person who had handed Shi Qing a sword from the left earlier was none other than Min Rou. In addition, his own eighteen younger brothers-at-arms were all sprawled haphazardly on the ground.

+ + +

As it turned out, Min Rou had struck the eighteen disciples of the Snow Mountain School down while Bai Wanjian was totally focused on battling Shi Qing, stabbing and wounding the eighteen one after another with the sword. Although the injury on each man's body was extremely minor, Min had exercised her internal strength through the tip of her sword right into her victims' acupoints. Consequently, none of the eighteen could move after being struck by her sword.

This skill was a speciality of Min's swordplay. Kind-hearted and benevolent, the woman had always been unwilling to injure and kill her opponents. Hence, she had come up with the original approach of incorporating the acupoint-sealing methods of the Taoist Temple of Greater Clarity into her swordplay techniques. Although the eighteen disciples of the Snow Mountain School had been struck by the sword, they were in reality victims of Min's acupoint-sealing techniques. However, Min's internal strength had not reached the top-most levels, or she could have had the men immobilised as soon as the tip of her sword touched their acupoints. Then, there would have been no need to injure the flesh.

After Min had handed the sword to her husband, she had used the point of her foot to lift another sword -- which had been dropped by one of the Snow Mountain disciples -- from the ground. Then, holding the sword in her hand, she had positioned herself three steps behind her husband and to his left, ready to move forward and attack.

Bai Wanjian's heart sank at once: Regardless of what the situation is, the battle between Shi Qing and me can only result in a draw. If Mrs Shi joins in, the earlier results will be replayed; so why should the fight continue? Feeling rather dejected, he said, "It is a pity that Elder Brother Feng is not here. If he was, we could have joined hands and fought both of you. Now that the defeat is clear, what else is there left to say?"

"That is correct," said Shi Qing. "When we meet the Dragon of Wind and Fire in the future..." Before he could finish, Shi remembered how Feng Wanli had his arm chopped off by his teacher because of his (Shi's) son, Shi Zhongyu. Even if they did meet each other in the future, they would not be able to engage in a sword-fight anyway. Thus, Shi Qing stopped speaking at once. He could not help but feel a deep sense of shame, for he could not find joy in the fact that he had defeated nineteen disciples of the Snow Mountain School together with his wife.

When Shi Potian saw the pale and pain-wrought countenance that Bai Wanjian had, as well as the sympathetic expressions on Shi Qing and Min Rou's faces, he thought: These eighteen disciples of the Snow Mountain School are all fools. None of them can help him engage Manor-Master Shi and his wife in a good round of sword-fighting or two. How very disappointing indeed!

Then, recalling how Bai Wanjian had gazed at him earlier with such love and concern, he thought: Master Bai treats me rather well. That Mrs Shi has given me some silver before, so she does not treat me badly too. They want to have a sword-fight, but are short of an opponent. There is an Elder Brother Feng somewhere, but he is not here right now. So everyone is not happy. Although I do not really know any swordplay techniques, I have already become quite familiar with them after watching everyone just now. It might be good for me to help them and join in the fun.

Hence, he got to his feet, copied Bai Wanjian's earlier actions and used the point of his foot to tap the hilt of a sword on the ground. As soon as his internal strength touched the sword, the blade leapt up with a *hu*. Making a bumbling grab for the hilt of the sword, he smiled and said, "You are short of one person, so you cannot have a competition with your swords. Let me join hands with Master Bai just for the fun of it. But I do not know what to do, so please give me

some pointers."

The sight of the young man suddenly standing up gave Bai Wanjian, Shi Qing and Min Rou a great shock.

Bai Wanjian knew that he had struck the young man on a few dozen acupoints earlier, so how could he suddenly take a step and move around? Hence, he was sure that Min Rou had released his acupoints after striking the eighteen disciples of his school down.

As for Shi Qing and Min Rou, they had expected Bai Wanjian to seal the young man's important acupoints as soon as he had been captured, so how could he even move?

"Yu..." Min Rou began, but before she could finish calling the name 'Yu'er', she stopped. Then, she turned and looked at her husband.

+ + +

Shi Potian had been lying on the ground for more than two shichen (4 hours) after Bai Wanjian struck him on the acupoints. Anyone who had his acupoints sealed by Bai had to wait for at least six shichen (12 hours) before these acupoints became open once more. Although Shi Potian did not know how to release his own blocked acupoints, he did have the benefit of a very rich level of internal strength. Therefore, his acupoints began opening up one after the other within one shichen (two hours) of being sealed, due to the natural flow of the internal strength in his body.

Muddled-headed and ignorant, Shi Potian had absolutely no idea what was happening. All he knew was that the arms and legs that were initially numb and immobile had gradually began to regain their strength and mobility.

+ + +

"Why do you want to join hands with me?" asked Bai Wanjian in a loud voice. "Do you want to try out the Swordplay Technique of the Snow Mountain School that you have learnt?"

Shi Potian thought: I have indeed learnt some swordplay techniques from watching all of you, but I am afraid that I have made mistakes in my learning. So he nodded and replied, "I am not sure if I have learnt the right thing. Please

teach me, Master Bai, Manor-Master Shi and Mrs Shi." As he spoke, he held his sword up diagonally and stood beside Bai Wanjian. The move was none other than "Two Camels Coming to the West" (Shuang¹ Tuo² Xi¹ Lai²), one of the stances in the Swordplay Technique of the Snow Mountain School.

Shi Qing and Min Rou gazed at Shi Potian. They had not seen him since he was sent to Lingxiao City to learn swordplay many years ago. Now, seeing one another again in a place far from home, Shi and Min found themselves grappling with a hundred different emotions, including affection, joy, resentment and shame. They could both see that their son had grown tall and sturdy. Although the young man had a rather weather-beaten and tired appearance, there was no mistaking the air of quintessence that he had. His eyes, in particular, were bright and clear, as if he had an extremely rich level of internal strength in his body.

A stern father according to the conventional perception of parenthood, Shi Qing began thinking about the various rules and regulations in the martial arts circle. Since the day his unworthy son damaged the reputation of Xuansu Manor so badly, he and his wife had become ashamed of meeting people in the realm of the rivers and lakes. In recent years, they had taken to making discreet queries on their son's whereabouts, without seeing any of their associates in the martial arts circle at all. Now that the young man had seen his parents, he did not even step up and offer them any greetings. Instead, he had asked for a competition in martial arts skills. This act alone was sufficient proof that the various frivolous and inappropriate behaviours that the Snow Mountain School had complained about were not untrue. Hence, Shi Qing could not help but gnash his teeth in silence, for his ability to keep his temper under control, as well as Bai Wanjian's presence, prevented him from erupting in anger then and there.

On the other hand, Min Rou was the epitome of the compassionate mother, her joy and delight far outweighing the anger and resentment she felt. She had originally given birth to two sons. After her second child suffered a tragic death in the hands of the enemy, she was so grieved that she eventually placed her love for both her children on her elder son, Shi Zhongyu, alone. Hence, she often explained her son to her husband on the former's behalf, saying that the one-sided claims of the Snow Mountain School were not necessarily trustworthy. Their son could have been bullied to the extent that he could no longer find

shelter in Lingxiao City. Furthermore, Bai Zizai's grand-daughter was probably a very spoilt girl who oppressed their son until he finally retaliated in indignation. If that was not the case, how could someone so young defy his elders with such an act of lewdness? After all, the girl from the Bai Family was only twelve or thirteen years old when the assault took place. Zhongyu would not do such an outrageous thing to a little girl.

Min Rou often shed silent tears in the years that she spent braving the winds and frosts of the realm of the rivers and lakes without any news of her son, afraid that he had perished in the great snow-covered mountains of the Western Region or become a victim of tigers and wolves. Thus, the sight of her beloved son was sufficient for the compassionate mother in her to forgive all his wrongdoings, including those that were as great as the Heavens. When she saw him walking up with a spring in his step and a sword in his hand, she could not help but respond with joy. In fact, she was dying to sweep him up in an embrace, hold him close and shower him with love.

She knew that her son had been craftier than most since young. Now that he wanted to join hands with Bai Wanjian in a sword-fight, he would certainly have a profound reason for it. She was deeply afraid that her husband would reprimand the young man in a fit of anger, yet she wanted to see how her son had progressed in his study of martial arts. Hence, she said, "All right, let the four of us deliberate over our skills in two pairs. After all, we are just going to stop short of doing actual harm, so there is nothing to be really concerned about." She spoke with a soft and gentle tone that was filled with tender affection, but her voice quivered because of the emotions in her heart.

Shi Qing cast a sideways glance at his wife before nodding his head in agreement.

Gentle and amiable by nature, Min Rou had always left the making of decisions in her husband's hands. She hardly ever offered any ideas of her own, but on the occasions that she did, her other half did not show any disagreement.

Shi Qing could guess the intentions of his wife's heart -- first, to see their son's pugilistic skills; and second, to ensure that Bai Wanjian was genuinely convinced of his defeat. He did not expect Shi Zhongyu to possess swordplay skills that exceeded those of his uncles-at-arms whom Min Rou had struck down,

regardless of how intelligent the young man might be. In addition, Shi Zhongyu would certainly not provide Bai Wanjian with any real assistance in going against his parents.

Bai Wanjian had thoughts of his own as well: If you use the Swordplay Technique of the Snow Mountain School in partnership with me against the enemy, you will be identifying yourself as a disciple of the school. So long as I am not killed by your family of three, I will go and get the plaque of command from our school-leader. Then, you would have to return to the Snow Mountain School with me regardless of the outcome of the fight. Any further resistance by Shi Qing and his wife would mean that they are breaking the rules and regulations of the martial arts circle. Hence, lifting his sword, he said, "Two against two is fine; so is three against one. After all, I have already tasted defeat under the Twin Swords of Xuansu Manor. I will just throw my lot in with you once more at the risk of my life." He had already made his mind up to die, so if the three members of the Shi Family closed in ruthlessly on him, he would only focus on having Shi Zhongyu killed. It was a task that he could accomplish, so long as he did not harbour the desire of keeping his own life.

When Shi Potian saw the trembling in the tip of Bai Wanjian's sword and the diagonal way in which it was pointed at Shi Qing, he realised that the blade was positioned more for defence than attack. Hence, he said, "In that case, I will be the one who goes on the offensive." His own sword trembled like Bai's before it was pushed towards Shi Qing's right shoulder. As soon as the stroke was executed, a sudden wave of raging sword-based energy (jian4 qi4) swept by. The sword had not moved very quickly at all, but the abundance of internal strength that accompanied the weapon had caused it to rip audibly through the air.

Bai Wanjian, Shi Qing and Min Rou gasped beneath their breaths. The move that they had just seen was part of the Swordplay Technique of the Snow Mountain School, but the internal strength exhibited was far beyond what Bai was capable of.

Bai, in particular, had initially looked upon Shi Potian's move with scorn: When you executed this "Clouds Across the Western Mount" (Yun2 Heng2 Xi1 Ling2), you raised your right elbow so much that the stroke ended too easily. Your left fingers were all placed in the wrong places, so you were unable to reach out and

strike your opponent's acupoints in a follow-up of the initial stroke. Your left foot took a step that was four 'cun' (10 centimetres) further than necessary, so your opponent did not have to fear your kicking his shin if he chose to counter-attack... In a glance, he could see eight or nine mistakes in Shi Potian's move, but his scorn turned into shock an instant later.

The level of sword-based energy that Shi Potian exhibited through that stroke was indeed something that Bai Wanjian rarely saw. In fact, the only time he saw a similar level of richness in internal strength was when his father gave a swordplay performance to a few highly-regarded disciples after drinking too much wine. Even then, the older Bai had to execute thirty to forty strokes before his internal energy could become sufficiently concentrated to create a wind-ripping force. As for Shi Potian, he created the wind-ripping force as soon as he began using the sword. Could a strange object, such as a whistle, have been attached to his blade? Yet, as quickly as the thought occurred, Bai knew that he was wrong. Then, he saw Shi Qing lifting his sword in defence as soon as the latter had gasped in shock.

ke The sword in Shi Qing's hand snapped into two at once. The upper half of the blade shot through the air and pierced several cun (1 cun = 3.33 centimetres) into the corner of a wall. Shi felt a wave of heat between his thumb and index finger (hu3 kou3). His arm shook and the lower half of the sword almost fell out of his hand. Although he was upset with this loser of a son, he could not help but express his appreciation for the young man's skills, just like all the other martial artists would do when they met a brilliant pugilist. Hence, the word "Good!" went forth from his mouth.

As for Shi Potian, the sight of Shi Qing's sword snapping into two was such a shock that he shouted: "A-yo!" He retracted his sword at once, with an apologetic and concerned look on his face. By then, he was already facing the light of the candle, so both Shi Qing and Min Rou could see his expression well.

A wave of warmth swept through the couple's hearts: Yu'er is still a filial and obedient son after all!

Casting the broken sword aside, Shi Qing used the point of his foot to lift another blade from the ground and said, "Do not be apprehensive. Come on, take this!" Then, he sent his sword towards Shi Potian's left leg.

But Shi Potian had never had any practice in swordplay before. Hence, despite the richness of his internal strength and the resulting ability to use an impressive amount of force in an attack, how could he respond to the mix of mocking, concrete, left and right movements that marked Shi Qing's style of swordsmanship? Consequently, a single stroke from his opponent was enough to throw his arms and legs into confusion. Fortunately, he could think and react in a considerably fast manner, so he managed to carry out a bumbling execution of "The Great Pine Greet the Visitor" (Cang1 Song4 Ying2 Ke4) by making a horizontal sweep with his sword.

Shi Qing responded with another diagonal stroke of the sword. This time, the blade went so close to Shi Potian's right leg that if the young man had been an implacable foe who had to be killed instead of a beloved son, the sword would have sliced the limb into two. The sword had only been given a light shake in this move, but it was already enough to give Min Rou a fright. Breaking out in cold sweat, she gasped: "Qing-ge(3)!"

When Shi Potian looked at his right leg, he found that there was already a rip in the trousers there. However, the sword that ripped through his trousers did not injure his flesh. "Thank you very much for showing me mercy," he said with an apologetic smile. "I have gone completely wrong in learning these swordplay techniques, so my skills are far worse than yours!"

He spoke in full honesty, but the remark was one that could sound significant to a suspicious listener. Bai Wanjian, in particular, found the words terribly unpleasant to his ears: So you told your father that your swordplay skills are far worse than his. Is that not an obvious way of belittling the Swordplay Technique of the Snow Mountain School? You even said that you have gone completely wrong in your learning, which just means that we have been keeping the methods selfishly to ourselves instead of teaching them to you. In one mere sentence, you have criticised the Snow Mountain School twice and without mercy! So long as I, Bai Wanjian, am still alive, how can I be subject to such denigration and humiliation?

Shi Qing raised his eyebrows as well: 'Shi-mei'(4) has told me time and again that Yu'er had been bullied by his uncles-and elder brothers-at-arms at the Snow Mountain School, but I have always felt that Elder Bai and Feng Wanli are

honest, open-hearted and chivalrous enough not to allow such a thing. Since they have accepted my son as their disciple, they would certainly not treat him poorly. Now, considering the two moves that he made with his sword a moment ago, I can see that the postures are all wrong. There are also a hundred flaws in the moves themselves, so how can he face the enemy with them? It does really look as if he has not learnt any concrete martial arts skills at Lingxiao City at all. Furthermore, the internal strength that he used with his first move was extremely powerful, but it has absolutely no relation with the Snow Mountain School in type and form. I do not even think that the Gentleman of Impressive Strength and Virtue has such a level of accomplishment in the cultivation of internal strength, so he (Yu'er) must have had a separate and amazing opportunity to learn it. I would have to look into the goings-on until the water subsides and the rocks emerge, so that the rights and wrongs of the matter can be distinguished more easily in the future.

Hence, he said, "Come, come, come. Let us not feel apprehensive about things, and have a good swordplay contest instead." Bending the fingers of his left hand into a mnemonic for the move that he was about to execute, he pointed ahead before raising his sword and sending it towards Bai Wanjian.

Bai Wanjian lifted his sword and fended the blow off. Then, he responded with a stab of his own.

Min Rou sent her sword forth as well, stabbing Shi Potian in a slow and relaxed move. The lack of speed was intentional, so that her son had the opportunity to respond before it was too late.

When Shi Potian saw how slow the sword was coming at him, he remembered how Min Rou had given him some silver at the marketplace of Hou Jian Ji years ago. Thus, he gave her an open-mouthed smile and a nod of gratitude before lifting his sword and deflecting the oncoming blade with a gentle move.

Min Rou was delighted, for she interpreted the expression as a son's greeting to his mother. Then, she sent her sword towards his waist.

This move is best countered in this way, thought Shi Potian, using a move from the Swordplay Technique of the Snow Mountain School to deflect the oncoming blade.

Min Rou could see that the young man was terribly unfamiliar with swordplay, especially when he showed some hesitation in his response. He also handled the sword in a very inexperienced manner. Hence, Min Rou could not help but feel upset: These swordsmen from the Snow Mountain School consider themselves righteous and chivalrous beyond the norm, but this is how they teach my son when it comes to swordplay! Then, she took a stab at Shi Potian's left shoulder.

She had to wait for him to think about a response before executing every move she made in full. If he had any difficulty in responding, she would simply wait and wait until he was done. Was this then a contest of swordplay skills? If her actions were compared to those of a teacher and his student at a session of practice, hers were certainly carried out with twice as much affection and patience.

Shi Potian's confidence grew after ten moves, enabling him to respond at a quicker pace. Happy with his progress, Min Rou nodded in affirmation whenever he managed to execute a move without too much trouble. By then, Shi Potian could see that Min Rou was actually giving him pointers on swordplay. Hence, he would re-execute a move whenever he did not receive a nod from her. As for Min Rou, she would attack him with the same stroke for a third time if she felt that his response was poor. She would only move on to the next stroke if there were no mistakes in his response.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the room, Shi Qing and Bai Wanjian fought for the third time that day. Now familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of their respective opponents, the men were even more unwilling to be indolent and neglectful.

After many moves, Shi Qing and Bai Wanjian entered the state of total absorption once more, for they could no longer hear or see the things that went on around them. They were not bothered about the way Min Rou fought with Shi Potian, or whether they were really fighting or not. Neither did they care about the winner and the loser. In fact, they could not pay attention to the other fight even if they wanted to, for the slightest loss of focus and concentration in their own fight would lead to injury and death.

On the other hand, Min Rou, who was giving Shi Potian pointers on swordplay, had ample opportunity to take in the fight between her husband and Bai Wanjian. Listening quietly as her husband inhaled and exhaled in long unhurried

breaths, she could tell that his internal strength remained abundant. Hence, even if he did not emerge victorious in the fight, he would certainly not be defeated. Then, noticing that Shi Potian had forgotten more than twenty of the seventy-two strokes in the Swordplay Technique of the Snow Mountain School, she began to guide him through the practice of the entire set again.

Shi Potian made better progress the second time around, so much so that he could come up with a counter-attack once in a while as a follow-through of a particular move. The speed of his responses increased as well. When he had finished performing more than forty of the strokes that he had learnt, Min Rou turned and found her husband still engaged in a heated fight with Bai Wanjian. She thought: Once all the strokes have been performed, it will be time for me to enter the fray and provide some assistance. We do not need to carry on quibbling with Bai Wanjian, so we will just take Yu'er and go.

By and by, Shi Potian took a stab at Min Rou, who raised her sword and fended the blow off before responding with a move of her own. She was sure that her son could take the strike well because he had learnt to deal with it earlier. Then, everything went black before Min Rou's eyes...

Apparently, the candle in the hall had been completely burnt, so its flame had gone out without warning.

Min Rou retracted the sword that she had sent out at once.

Shi Potian did not have any experience in facing the enemy, so he reacted to the black-out in an unexpected way. Instead of retreating into the darkness, he moved forward in an attempt to express his gratitude to Min Rou for teaching him swordplay. This forward step, however, took his body right into the woman's sword.

All Min Rou felt was a slight give in the sword, and the blade entered human flesh. Greatly shocked, she retracted the sword and threw it away. "Have you been stabbed?" she asked in fear as she reached out and hugged Shi Potian in the dark. "Where is the wound? Where is the wound?"

Shi Potian tried to reply, but he only managed to say "I... I..." before a coughing fit stopped him from talking.

Min Rou quickly shook her fire-booklet (huo3 zhe2) alight. She was usually very

calm and collected, but when she saw blood all over Shi Potian's chest, she became so frightened that she was lost for words. As panic took over, she looked up at Shi Qing and asked, " Shi-ge(5), what ... what should we do?"

+ + +

Despite the darkness, Shi Qing and Bai Wanjian had not stopped fighting at all. Instead, each man had moved and fought according to the sounds that his opponent's sword made as it moved through the air.

When Min Rou shook the fire-booklet alight and cried out in shock, Shi Qing cast a sideways glance at the commotion and found Shi Potian lying wounded on the ground. Min Rou looked very frightened. As a father who cared about his son, Shi Qing soon became a little distracted.

That tiny flaw was all Bai Wanjian needed. Taking advantage of Shi Qing's lack of focus, Bai sent his sword towards a vital point on his opponent's chest in a move that he (Shi) had no opportunity to ward off. When the sword was eight cun (26.64 centimetres) away from its target, it stopped.

Earlier that day, Min Rou had spared Bai Wanjian's life after getting him into the path of a fatal move. Now, Bai had done the same for Shi Qing, sparing the latter's life in return. Henceforth, no party could be said to owe the other anything in this regard.

But Shi Qing was so concerned about his son's injury that he was not even bothered about the gains, losses, glory and disgrace that were associated with the fight he just had. Bending quickly over Shi Potian, he saw blood seeping slowly out of the wound on the young man's chest, an obvious indication that the wound was not very deep. As it turned out, Min Rou had been extremely fast in her reflexes, retracting the sword as soon as its tip entered the flesh. Hence, both Shi Qing and Min Rou were somewhat comforted and relieved.

Then, they saw an icy-cold blade pointing at Shi Potian's throat. "You son humiliated my beloved daughter," said Bai Wanjian in a frosty voice. "As a result, she committed suicide by throwing herself over a cliff at such a young age. This grievance must not be left unaddressed. If both of you would allow me to take your son to Lingxiao City, he would live for at least another two months. If you insist on wresting him away by force, I would have him stabbed with the sword

at once."

Shi Qing and Min Rou exchanged a glance.

Min Rou, in particular, could not help but shiver, for she knew that this man would carry his words out in action. By the time his sword had done its work, the situation would not change for the better even if she joined hands with her husband and had Bai Wanjian killed beneath their swords.

Then, Shi Qing gave a signal with his eyes, took his wife by the wrist, leapt up and dashed out of the hall. Just before she stepped outside, Min Rou turned and looked at her beloved son who was still lying on the ground. Her eyes were filled with warm affection as well as bitter sorrow. At that moment, the fire-booklet in her hand went out, plunging the hall into darkness again.

Bai Wanjian turned sideways and listened as the footfalls of Shi Qing and his wife went further and further away. He knew that the couple would certainly not stop in their efforts to retrieve their son, so the journey back to Lingxiao City would definitely be fraught with troublesome disturbances and violent fights.

Now that the couple was temporarily gone, Bai had a moment to reflect on the fight that he just had, for he had never been involved in such an extraordinary level of danger all his life. If the candle had been half a cun (1.67 centimetres) longer, that little rascal who was surnamed Shi would certainly have been taken away by his parents.

Bai re-focused his thoughts and took a breath. After that, he reached into his shirt for his flint and steel(6), only to find them missing from their usual place. It was then that he remembered having given the objects to his younger brother-at-arms, Wen Wanfu, prior to visiting the headquarters of the Clan of Eternal Happiness. At that time, he had to avoid being burdened by unnecessary weight during heated fights. After all, the difference between the skills of one top-notch pugilist and the next was usually nothing but a hair. Therefore, a lighter body would mean greater agility and ease of movement.

Without much ado, Bai took the flint and steel, as well as some touch paper (huo3 zhi3; a type of paper coated with potassium nitrate that is used for lighting fires), from one of his younger brothers-at-arms who was lying on the ground. Then, after lighting the fire, he began looking around for a candle ... only

to be shocked out of his wits!

Shi Zhongyu, who had been near his feet, was gone!

A chill ran down his spine and all the hairs on his body stood on end: There is a ghost, there is a ghost!

If not for the appearance of ghosts and monsters, how could Shi Zhongyu have disappeared without a trace in a mere instant, without Bai even realising it at all?

Thus alerted, Bai threw the flame aside, picked his sword up and rushed outside the temple. There was absolutely no one in sight. He had initially thought that the perpetrator was a 'ghost', but he quickly realised that a highly-skilled pugilist had probably been lying in wait for a long time. When he was groping about in the darkness for the flint, the pugilist -- who was probably Bei Haishi -- had seized the opportunity to carry the rescue out.

Bai leapt quickly on to the roof of the temple. Looking around, he saw that the only place where anyone could have hidden was a clump of trees in the south-east. Thus, he leapt off the roof and hurried to the edge of the woods. "Sneaky men have no courage," he shouted. "Come out and fight to the death!" He waited for a moment, but there was no answer from the woods. "Physician Bei, is that you?" he called out again.

The woods remained silent.

By then, Bai could no longer be bothered about the possibility of an ambush by the enemy amongst the trees. Lifting his sword before him, he charged into the woods ... only to find it empty as well.

A cold wind blew, rustling the leaves that had fallen on the ground. It was already late autumn in Jiangnan.

Bai's anger subsided. After his last fight with Shi Qing, he had no longer dared to look upon the pugilists of the land with a narrow mind. Now, he had become even more convinced of the saying: "Beyond the sky, there is another; above a man, there is another."

A vague chill entered Bai's heart as his daughter's young and tragic passing came to mind. Sorrow crept up on him once more.

Definitions, explanations and/or words left (mostly) in their original form:

Those covered in earlier chapters are not repeated.

The Long River (Chang2 Jiang1 长江) = This is the longest river in China. It is commonly -- and somewhat erroneously -- known as the Yangtze River.

Brother Wang = The "Wang" (wang2 王) used here is a very common surname that is different from the "Wang" (wang1 汪) in Wang Wanyi's name. Wang Wanren, the one who had been seriously wounded in Chapter 6 and captured by the Clan of Eternal Happiness soon after, uses the common "Wang", but he is unlikely to be the one referred to here. In the 3rd edition, the confusion is cleared by naming the person in question as "Brother Qian" (qian2 钱).

Qing-ge (清哥) = The "ge" (ge1 哥) here is a term of affection. See Terms of Address in Facts and Figures.

Shi-mei (shi1 mei4 师妹) = This term of address means "younger sister-at-arms". When Shi Qing and Min Rou first met as martial arts students at the Taoist Temple of Greater Clarity, they addressed each other as "younger sister-at-arms" (shi-mei 师妹) and "elder brother-at-arms" (shi-ge 师哥). After they fell in love and got married, they continued using these terms of address. In order to differentiate this romantic relationship from the ordinary ones that siblings-at-arms can have, the translation has retained the Chinese terms of address that Shi Qing and Min Rou use for each other.

Shi-ge (shi1 ge1 师哥) = See Shi-mei above.

Steel and flint (huo3 dao1 huo3 shi2 火刀火石) = These are instruments with which fire can be created.

Chapter 8 - The Moron

The wind and water currents were so swift in the middle of the Long River that the two boats were already more than ten zhang (33.33 metres) apart in a twinkling. Hence, regardless of how highly skilled Ding Busan was in qinggong, he could not jump across the expanse that separated the two vessels. Meanwhile, the smaller and lighter boat sailed further and further away, until it could no longer be caught up with.

Although Shi Potian had run himself into Min Rou's sword, he was not seriously hurt; neither was the wound particularly painful. He saw Shi Qing and Min Rou leaving the temple and the flame of the candle going out. Then, as the hall plunged into darkness, he suddenly felt someone putting a hand over his mouth and pulling him silently into the space beneath the altar.

Reeling from surprise, he saw a flash of light as Bai Wanjian brought out his fire-booklet and shouted, "There is a ghost, there is a ghost!" Then, he saw Bai dash out of the temple, because he (Bai) did not know that the missing young man was beneath the altar.

Shi Potian could not help but laugh silently at the scene. Then, he felt someone picking him up and carrying him quickly out of the temple. The person sped along for a while before leaping on to a small boat. Then, someone lit an oil lamp beside him.

The bearer of the lamp was none other than Ding Dang. Delighted at the sight, Shi Potian asked, "Ding Ding Dang Dang, who brought me here?"

"Grandfather did, of course," answered Ding Dang, curling her lip into an expression of disbelief. "Who else could it be?"

Turning around, Shi Potian found Ding Busan sitting on the bow of the boat with his arms wrapped around his knees and his eyes looking upwards into the sky. "Grandfather," said Shi Potian, "what have you ... you brought me here for?"

Ding Busan snorted in disgust. "A'Dang, this man is a moron," he said. "Why did you marry him? Since you have not consummated your marriage, perhaps we should just have him killed with a slash of the sabre as soon as possible."

"No, no!" said Ding Dang at once. "Tian-ge has been very ill for a long time, so he has not been able to recall a lot of things. But he will get well in time." Then, turning to Shi Potian, she added, "Tian-ge, let me take a look at your wound." She opened the front of his shirt, moistened a handkerchief with water and began wiping the bloodstains around the wound away. When she was done, she applied some medicine for metal-inflicted wounds (jin1 chuang1 yao4)(1) on the injury before tearing a piece of fabric from the edge of her own garment and binding the injury up.

"Thank you," said Shi Potian. "Ding Ding Dang Dang, so you and Grandfather were both hidden under that table? That was just like playing hide-and-seek. How fun!"

"So you think it was fun?" snapped Ding Dang. "Your father and mother were having a battle of swords with that man who was surnamed Bai! You would never know how flustered I felt, just watching them!"

"My father and mother?" asked Shi Potian. "Are you saying that the man in black is my father? But that attractive woman is not my mother ... my mother does not look like that; she is not as good-looking..."

Ding Dang sighed. "Tian-ge," she said, "your illness has certainly done you quite a bit of harm, so much so that you have even forgotten who your parents are. When you were using the Swordplay Technique of the Snow Mountain School, I could see that you were terribly unfamiliar with it. Could you have completely forgotten even the martial arts skills that you have trained in before? How ... how can this be?"

As it turned out, Ding Busan and his grand-daughter had tracked Bai Wanjian down after the latter made off with Shi Potian. When Bai left the temple to check on the surroundings, Ding and his grand-daughter had seized the opportunity to hide under the altar. Therefore, they saw everything that occurred after that, including the arrival of Shi Qing and his wife, as well as the sword-battles that followed.

Ding Busan had initially thought that Shi Potian had been defeated only in pretence, because he had certainly seemed to have a purpose for doing it. Therefore, Ding had not expected Shi's swordplay skills to be so poor. In fact, the

old man soon became so infuriated that he almost burst! What a moron, what a moron! he had cursed repeatedly in his heart. Then, when Bai Wanjian went searching for a set of flint and steel, Ding had seized the opportunity to rescue Shi.

Just then, the old man heard Shi Potian ask: "What martial arts do I know? I do not know any martial arts at all, and I have even less understanding of what you are saying."

Ding Busan could no longer be patient. Getting to his feet abruptly, he turned around and said in a stern voice: "A'Dang, what exactly has happened to you? Are you so obsessed that you can no longer think clearly? How could you have insisted on marrying this little nonsensical, baffling and inexplicably odd wretch? I will just kill him with a strike of the palm ... I assure you, I will find another handsome, intelligent, refined and caring young man who is also adept with both pen and sword to be your spouse."

Tears welled up in Ding Dang's eyes. "I ... I do not want any other young hero," she sobbed. "He ... he is not a moron; he has been seriously ill, so he is somewhat confused at the moment."

"What do you mean 'confused at the moment'?" roared Ding Busan in anger. "His father is obviously a highly skilled pugilist, but he prefers to call himself 'Gouzazhong' -- a bastard -- instead. If he is not a moron, your grandfather is! Look at the ghastly way in which he used the sword. I would be surprised if the sight did not cause anyone to explode in a fit of anger. He was so clumsy that there was not a single move without a hundred flaws. The holes were everywhere. Heh-heh, his opponent had clearly withdrawn her sword, but this wretch had to throw himself towards the blade. He just had to suffer an injury before he could be happy. If I do not kill such a worthless pus-filled good-for-nothing today, he would still be slaughtered by someone else sooner or later. Then, if the news of Ding Busan's grandson-in-law being killed by someone else gets out into the realm of the rivers and lakes, how can I still show my face in public? No, he must not be left unkilld!"

Biting her lower lip, Ding Dang asked: "Grandfather, what do you want done, if there is a way to spare him?"

"Eh, why should I spare him?" asked Ding Busan in return. "He must not be left unkilld. Then, he would not be able to embarrass me. When people hear that Old Ding the Third killed his own grandson-in-law, they would not find it strange. But if they hear that the grandson-in-law of Old Ding the Third was killed by someone else, what I am going to do?"

"What else?" quipped Ding Dang. "Just go and have him avenged."

Ding Busan burst into laughter: "Ha-ha! I would go and have this worthless pus-filled good-for-nothing avenged? What do you take your grandfather for?"

"It was you who told me to go through the marriage rites with him," wailed Ding Dang. "He has already become my husband. If you kill him, are you not asking me to become a young widow?"

Ding Busan scratched his head. "When I tested him that day, I did not find his internal strength poor," he said. "He could qualify as my grandson-in-law, but I did not expect him to turn out to be a moron. Since you insist on stopping me from killing him, I will let it pass. But you would have to comply with a condition that I set."

"What is it?" asked Ding Ding, delighted to hear an opportunity to turn the situation around. "Tell me quick, Grandfather, tell me quick!"

"I say that he is a moron who should be killed," answered Ding Busan. "But you say that he is not a moron, so he should not be killed. Fine, I will give him ten days to track that Bai Wanjian down for a duel of swords. If he can kill or defeat that 'Frost of the North-west' or whatever, I will spare his life and allow both of you to become true husband-and-wife."

Ding Dang heaved a cold mouthful of breath. She had seen with her own eyes how exquisite Bai Wanjian's swordplay skills were, so how could her Darling Shi be the match of this great and well-known swordsman? He could practise for another twenty years without any avail, so she said, "Grandfather, this is obviously a difficult task that is almost impossible to complete."

"If it is difficult, so be it," said Ding Busan, "and if it is easy, so be it. If the moron cannot defeat Bai Wanjian, I will have him killed with a single strike of the palm." He felt that he had come up with a very good quest, for the wretch would never be able to succeed regardless of what anyone would say. Therefore, he

could not help but feel pleased and satisfied with himself.

On the other hand, Ding Dang was filled with sorrow. When she turned towards Shi Potian, she found him looking as if he did not have a single care in the world. "Tian-ge," she said to him in a low voice, "my grandfather has given you ten days to defeat that Bai Wanjian. What do you have to say about it?"

"Bai Wanjian?" asked Shi Potian. "His swordplay skills are very good, so how am I going to defeat him?"

"That is true," answered Ding Dang. "My grandfather says that if you do not defeat him, he is going to have you killed."

Shi Potian laughed. "Why does he want me killed for no rhyme or reason?" he said. "Grandfather is joking with you, so why are you taking him so seriously? After all, Grandfather is a good man, not a bad one. So how ... how can he kill me?"

Ding Dang sighed. Darling Shi's illness has indeed caused him to become so dim-witted that he no longer understands reason, she thought. The only thing I can do now is to agree to Grandfather's quest. Then, I will have to find a way for Darling to escape within the next ten days. Hence, she turned to Ding Busan and said, "All right, Grandfather, I agree. Let me go and defeat Bai Wanjian within the next ten days."

Ding Busan replied with a sarcastic sneer. Then, he said, "Your grandfather is hungry; go and make me something to eat! But let me tell you: one, teach not; two, escape not; three, spare not. 'Teach not' means that I am not going to impart any martial arts skills to that moron. 'Escape not' means that you had better not think of ways for him to flee for his life. If I find out that he is thinking of running away, I will have him killed without waiting for the end of ten-day period. As for 'spare not', it is something that I need not speak more of."

"Since you say that he is a moron, he would not be able to learn any martial arts even if you teach him," said Ding Dang. "So why must you say 'one, teach not'?"

"Even if your grandfather is willing to teach," said Ding Busan, "how could he defeat Bai Wanjian in ten days? Ten years of instruction may not even be sufficient for the task."

"Well, that is due to your poor ability in teaching," said Ding Dang. "Your martial arts skills are peerless beneath the sun, so if you train an apprentice up well, how could the apprentice be any weaker than the disciple of Bai Zizai from the Snow Mountain School? Could the Gentleman of Impressive Strength and Virtue Bai Zizai be better than you?"

Ding Busan smiled. "A'Dang," he said, "your prodding and goading is not going to work on me. Even the deities and fairies would not be able to do anything about a moron such as he. Did you not hear what Shi Qing and his wife said to Bai Wanjian? The moron studied martial arts at the Snow Mountain School for many years, only to succeed in picking up the swordplay skills of a one-legged cat!"

Named Ding Busan (literally, Ding 'Not Three'), the old man had a taboo about the use of the word 'san' (three). Therefore, he changed the idiomatic expression of a 'three-legged cat' (san1 jiao3 mao1) -- meaning 'a jack of all trades' -- to a single-legged one.

By then, the boat had begun sailing against the currents of the Long River towards the west as the east winds filled its sails. As the sky grew brighter, a whitish layer of mist could be seen on the surface of the water.

"All right," said Ding Dang. "Since you are not going to teach him, I will. Grandfather, I am not going to cook any meals. I want to teach Tian-ge martial arts."

"So you are not going to cook," roared Ding Busan in anger. "Are you not making a deliberate attempt to starve your grandfather to death?"

"Since you want to kill my husband, I had better starve you to death first," answered Ding Dang.

Ding Busan spat in disgust. "Go and cook quickly," he said.

Ignoring the old man, Ding Dang turned to Shi Potian and said, "Tian-ge, let me teach you a set of martial arts techniques. I assure you, you will be able to defeat that Bai Wanjian in ten days."

"Rubbish!" said Ding Busan. "How can a girl like you succeed in something that even I am unable to do?"

The quarrel between the old man and his grand-daughter had resumed without any signs of abating.

Deep in her heart, Ding Dang was really worried. She knew that her grandfather had such an eccentric temperament that gentle pleas would never result in any success. The only way to change his mind was, perhaps, through the use of trickery. She thought: I will not cook for him. When he is terribly hungry, he will have to moor the boat and go ashore to buy something to eat. Then, I will seize the opportunity to get Darling Shi to escape.

Yet, no one could have foreseen Shi Potian's response to the hunger-induced frown and dismay on Ding Busan's face. Since he too was feeling hungry, he stood up and said, "I will go and cook." After all, there was no way that he could have guessed the intentions on Ding Dang's mind.

Reacting in anger, the young woman snapped: "So you want to go and slog over a meal. If your wound breaks open, what are you going to do?"

"The medicine for metal-inflicted wounds that is used by our Ding Family is as efficacious as the deities," said Ding Busan. "It heals a wound as soon as it is applied, so what is there to be concerned about, considering that his sword-inflicted wound is not particularly serious? Dear child, go quickly and make your grandfather something to eat." He had actually stopped referring to the young man as 'the moron' for the sake of a meal.

"So he is going to cook for you," said Ding Dang. "Are you still going to have him killed?"

"Cooking is one matter," answered Ding Busan. "Having him killed is another. Both are not related, so how can they be discussed in the same breath?"

Meanwhile, Shi Potian pressed the wound on his chest. Sure enough, it did not hurt very much any more. Hence, he went off to the stern of the boat to wash and cook some rice. There was an old helmsman steering the boat at the stern, who did not appear to hear the exchanges that had taken place between the Dings and the young man.

All his life, preparing meals was something that Shi Potian did best. Within a short period of time, he had already fried two fish to a crisp, and cooked a pot of hot and fragrant white rice.

Ding Busan praised the young man as he ate. "If your martial arts skills were as good as a tenth of your ability to cook," he said, "I will not have you killed. If you did not go through the rites of marriage with A'Dang that day and became my cook instead, I would not have even spoken about having you killed. In fact, if anyone wants you dead, I would certainly not allow it at all. Sigh, it is a pity that I have already laid the ten-day deadline down. The word of Ding Busan is as steadfast as the mountains, so it will never be changed. If I had given you a month-long period instead, I would have had the opportunity to enjoy your cooking for another twenty days. Would that not be wonderful? But regret is not going to get me anywhere at this point, for there is nothing else that I can come up with." Then, he heaved a seemingly endless string of sighs.

After the meal, Shi Potian and Ding Dang went to the stern to wash the bowls and chopsticks side by side. Seeing that her grandfather was sitting at the bow, Ding Dang whispered: "I will teach you a set of seizing techniques (qin2 na2 shou3 fa3) shortly, so you had better remember it with all your heart."

"When I have learnt it, am I to go and challenge Master Bai?" asked Shi Potian.

"Are you really a moron?" asked Ding Dang in return. "Tian-ge, you ... you were not like this in the past."

"How was I in the past?" asked Shi Potian.

Turning a little red in the face, Ding Dang replied: "When you saw me in the past, your mouth would be sweeter than honey. You were so quick-witted that we had plenty to talk and laugh about. You teased me until I was filled with delight, for the words that came out of your mouth were often unexpected and unimaginable. Now, you have become really dim-witted."

"I am not your Tian-ge in the first place," said Shi Potian with a sigh. "He knows how to make you happy, but I do not. You had better go and find him instead."

"Tian-ge, does this mean that you are angry with me?" asked Ding Dang in a gentle and persuasive voice.

Shi Potian shook his head. "Why should I be angry?" he asked in return. "I am telling you the truth, but you do not believe me at all."

Ding Dang gazed at the water that swept by the side of the boat and began

mumbling to herself: "I wonder when he will return to his former self." As she became lost in her thoughts, a porcelain bowl slipped out of her hand and fell into the river. After bobbing twice in the greenish waves, the bowl disappeared.

"Ding Ding Dang Dang, I will never become that Tian-ge of yours," said Shi Potian. "If I were a ... a moron for the rest of my life, you would never like me, would you?"

"I do not know, I do not know!" wept Ding Dang. Terribly vexed, she picked one porcelain bowl up after another and threw them into the middle of the river.

Shi Potian spoke again: "If I ... I am quick and clever with words, and can make you happy with what I say, I do not mind talking unceasingly all day. But ... but I am really not your 'Tian-ge'. I cannot pretend to be him even if you want me to."

Ding Dang gazed at Shi Potian. The sun, which was rising at that time, cast a reddish glow on Shi's face. Although his eyes darted about in a lively manner, his entire countenance was actually one of whole-hearted sincerity. Ding Dang let out a faint sigh. "If you are not my Tian-ge," she said, "how can my bite leave a scar on your shoulder? Why do you find similar enjoyment in toying with flowers and grass, and dallying with the women who come your way? Not only did you seduce the wife of your clan-member Incense-Master Zhan, you also took liberties with that Hua-guniang from the Snow Mountain School? If I say that you are my Tian-ge, why have you suddenly become dim-witted and moronic, without any of your former finesse and poise?"

"I am your husband," said Shi Potian with a laugh. "Is it not good for me to be honest?"

"No," answered Ding Dang with a shake of her head. "I would rather have you lively and mischievous like you once were. If you rob someone of his wife, so be it. If you take liberties with someone's daughter, so be it. I just do not like your good behaviour, discipline and mannerisms."

The matter of robbing someone of his wife had nagged at Shi Potian since the day he first heard about it, so he asked: "Robbing someone of his wife? What is the purpose of that? Elderly Uncle says that a person who takes someone else's things without permission is a petty thief. Since I have stolen someone's wife, does that make me a petty thief?"

Ding Dang found Shi Potian's words increasing convoluted, so much so that they soon became too ridiculous for her. As a fit of anger rose inside her, she reached out, took his ear and tugged it hard. Almost at once, the base of the young man's ear began to bleed.

Reeling in pain, Shi Potian reacted by pushing Ding Dang's hand away. As he did, Ding Dang felt a burst of energy so strong and extraordinary that she tumbled backwards and almost broke the wooden mast in her fall.

"A-yo!" she cried. "Ghastly creature, are you beating your wife? Why did you use such a great amount of strength?"

"I am sorry!" said Shi Potian at once. "I ... I did not do it deliberately."

Ding Dang looked at her arm and found a huge and swollen bruise in green and purple. Then, quite unexpectedly, the anger on her face turned into delight. Reaching out for Shi Potian's hand and swinging it, she said, "Tian-ge, you have indeed been pretending and deceiving me all along."

"Pretending?" asked Shi Potian, stunned.

"You have not lost any of your martial arts skills," answered Ding Dang.

"I do not know martial arts," said Shi Potian.

"If you keep on spouting nonsense, look and see if I will pay you any attention again," snapped Ding Dang. Then, she raised her hand and sent it towards his left cheek.

Shi Potian turned away and lifted his own hand in defence, but the move that Ding Dang used came from a palm technique that had been passed down through her family. Sudden but swift, the move was naturally beyond the reach of Shi Potian's unskilled hand. All he felt was a burst of pain on his face, for he had already been struck without a single sound.

As for Ding Dang, she felt a terrible jolt on her arm. Her palm sprang away from Shi Potian's face as if it had been pushed aside by his cheek, prompting her to utter another "A-yo!" in even greater shock and fright than before. After knowing that Shi Potian had not lost his martial arts skills, she had thought that he would be able to avoid her palm with ease. Consequently, she had exercised a gentle yet highly toxic form of internal strength on to her palm, without realising

that Shi Potian would actually be so clumsy in deflecting her move. He had acted as if he did not know any martial arts, but when her palm touched his cheek, the palm was jolted off by his internal strength.

As Ding Dang caught her right hand with her left, she saw the dark print of a small palm appearing on Shi Potian's left cheek. Her 'Black Palm of Death' (Hei1 Sha4 Zhang3) was a formidable technique that she had learnt personally from her grandfather, but she was not very advanced in its practice. This, together with the presence of a very profound level of internal strength in his body, had enabled Shi Potian to escape with only a very minor injury. However, the black palm-print on his face would not fade until at least half a month later.

Aching with tender affection and feeling apologetic at the same, Ding Dang reached out and held Shi Potian around the waist. "Tian-ge," she sobbed as she pressed her cheek against his bruise, "I really did not know that you have not recovered in full."

The embrace of such a beautiful maiden caused Shi Potian to sigh. Since his face did not really hurt very much, he said, "Ding Ding Dang Dang, first, you are angry. Then, in the next moment, you become delighted. I still do not understand why this is so."

"So...so what should I do?" asked Ding Dang, becoming worked up once more. "What should I do?" Sitting straight up, she took a ceramic bottle from inside her shirt and poured a medicinal pellet out of it. Then, after getting Shi Potian to ingest the pellet, she said, "Sigh, I hope it will not leave a scar."

The duo snuggled against each other and sat on the stern. No one spoke.

After a long period of silence, Ding Dang put her mouth against Shi Potian's ear and whispered: "Tian-ge, although you have forgotten your martial arts skills after your recent bout of illness, your internal strength remains. I will teach you that set of seizing techniques, for it will be very useful to you."

"Since you are willing to teach me," said Shi Potian with a nod, "I will learn it with all my heart."

Ding Dang reached out with her fingers and caressed the black palm-print on the young man's cheek. Feeling very apologetic for hurting him so, she leaned over impulsively and kissed the bruise. All at once, the duo's faces turned

thoroughly red with embarrassment. However, their hearts were filled with an incomparable sweetness. Then, after sweeping aside the strands of hair around her face, Ding Dang began demonstrating the eighteen moves that make up her set of seizing techniques.

That day, Ding Dang taught Shi Potian six moves, all of which were duly memorised. Then, the duo practised using the moves one by one. The next day, Ding Dang imparted another six moves. By the end of the third day, Shi Potian had learnt all eighteen moves to the point of familiarity. Although there were only eighteen moves in this set of seizing techniques, the variations within them were numerous and complex.

During these three days, Shi Potian spent all his time practising the techniques with Ding Dang. Meanwhile, Ding Busan observed the goings-on with a sceptical eye. Sometimes, he would make sarcastic remarks to ridicule them.

By the fourth day, the sword-inflicted wound on Shi Potian's chest had more or less healed. Ding Dang was delighted at the extremely quick manner in which her Darling Shi had progressed, so when she heard Ding Busan calling the young man 'a moron' again, she asked: "Grandfather, how many days would it take a moron to learn the eighteen moves that make up the Seizing Techniques of our Ding Family?"

Ding Busan was momentarily dumbfounded, for he could see that Shi Potian had already learnt the set of seizing techniques. This meant that the wretched fellow was certainly not dim-witted, so was he pretending to be stupid or had he really forgotten everything in the past? Yet, unwilling to lose out even in words, Ding Busan eventually came up with an answer in self-defence: "Some morons are clever, while others are dense. Clever morons will learn the techniques in half a day, but brainless ones like your Darling Shi need three days to learn them."

A smile appeared in the corner of Ding Dang's mouth. "Grandfather, how many days did you take to learn this set of seizing techniques years ago?" she asked.

"How many days would I take?" answered Ding Busan. "Your great-grandfather had to instruct me only once, and I learnt the techniques within half a day."

"Ha-ha!" laughed Ding Dang. "So you are a clever moron, Grandfather!"

"How rude!" snapped Ding Busan, his countenance darkening. "Sheer

nonsense!"

Just then, a small boat sailed up from the lower reaches of the river. The banks on both sides of the river at that particular spot were open and wide, while the water current was smooth and steady. The oncoming boat had a large sail and four oarsmen who moved their wooden oars at a very fast pace. Small and light, the boat came closer to Ding Busan's vessel.

Two men in white clothes stood on the bow of the small boat. One of them called out in a loud voice: "Is the fellow who is surnamed Shi on the vessel before us? Quick, stop your vessel, stop your vessel!"

Ding Dang responded with a light snort of disgust: "Grandfather, people from the Snow Mountain School have come in pursuit of Darling Shi."

Ding Busan broke into a smile. "Let them capture the moron and take him away," he said. "Let them dismember him into ten thousand pieces with a thousand sabres. Only then will the desires of your grandfather's heart be fulfilled."

"Will they be taking the clever moron?" asked Ding Dang. "Or the foolish one?"

"The foolish one, of course!" answered Ding Busan. "Who dares to capture the clever moron anyway?"

"That is true," said Ding Dang with a smile. "The clever moron is highly skilled in martial arts, so no one dares to offend him at all."

Taken aback, Ding Busan roared: "Girl, how dare you curse your grandfather in a roundabout way?"

"Well, when the Clan of Eternal Happiness asks Old Ding the Third for their clan-leader after the Snow Mountain School has had your grandson-in-law killed," said Ding Dang, "would you not be left without much respect?"

"Why not?" asked Ding Busan. "I would gain much respect indeed." Then, feeling that his words could not justify themselves, he added: "I will twist and break the neck of anyone who dares to say that Old Ding the Third would lose respect."

Ding Dang began talking to herself: "Most people would not dare to say

anything, of course, but I am afraid that Fourth Grandfather would spout nonsense and say that if he had a grandson-in-law, he would certainly not allow anyone to have him killed. I wonder if Grandfather would dare to twist and break the neck of his own younger brother? Even if he has the courage to do so, I do not know if he has the ability to get it done."

Fuming with anger, Ding Busan said, "So you say that Old Fourth has better skills in martial arts than I? What a fart, what a fart! He is far beneath me in pugilistic skills."

As the elderly man and his grand-daughter spoke, the small boat came nearer. The men in white on the boat shouted again: "Hey you, arrogant fellow! You look like the rascal Shi Zhongyu from the Clan of Eternal Happiness. Why are you not stopping your boat?"

"Ding Ding Dang Dang," said Shi Potian, "someone has come in pursuit of us. What do you say we do?"

"How should I know what to do?" asked Ding Dang in return. "You are a man, so do not tell me that you do not have the slightest idea about this."

By then, the small boat had come within a zhang (3.33 metres) of its quarry. The two men in white shouted in unison and leapt towards the stern of Shi Potian's vessel. They had long swords in their hands, weapons which gleamed and shone in the sunlight.

When Shi Potian saw that the duo were Snow Mountain disciples whom he had met at the temple of the local deity, he thought: I wonder how I have offended them, that they would pursue me with such relentlessness. Then, a *zip* later, he found a sword heading towards his shoulder.

The past three days had seen Shi Potian constantly practising an array of martial arts moves with Ding Dang. Whenever he was slow in using his hands and feet, she would box his ears and pull his hair. After suffering quite a bit of hardship in this way, Shi Potian had become faster and more agile in responding with his body and limbs. Now, his responsive abilities were different from those he had shown in the temple of the local deity during the martial arts exchange with Shi Qing and his wife. When he saw the sword coming at him, he did not take time to even think about what to do. He simply exercised the eighth move,

'The Hand of the Phoenix's Tail' (Feng4 Wei3 Shou3), making an arc with his right hand and grabbing the aggressor's wrist before giving it a twist.

"Ah!" shouted the victim, dropping his sword at once.

Shi Potian followed through by lifting his right elbow and striking his victim on the chin with a *smack*. The victim's chin shattered at once, as a mouthful of blood and more than ten teeth spurted out on to the deck of the boat. Never did Shi Potian expect the Hand of the Phoenix's Tail to have such power, so he was shocked involuntarily out of his wits.

As Shi's heart thumped wildly, the second disciple of the Snow Mountain School -- who had gone off to launch a simultaneous attack at the bow of the boat -- suddenly found his elder brother-at-arms seriously wounded within the blink of an eye. That elder brother-at-arms was more highly skilled in martial arts than himself, so if he went further forward, he would certainly not have much success. Therefore, he rushed towards his brother and picked him up.

By then, both the large vessel and the small boat were sailing side by side. The Snow Mountain disciple took the wounded man and leapt back into his own boat, shouting out orders to lower the sail and turn the rudder as he went.

Soon, the small boat could be seen turning around and sailing downstream towards the east. A short while later, the boat was already far away. However, curses and shouts of anger could still be heard, carried upstream by the east wind.

+ + +

Looking at the pool of blood and the teeth on the deck, Shi Potian was both rather astonished and very stricken by his conscience. "I ... I am really sorry!" he muttered to himself.

Ding Dang came out of the cabin, walked over to Shi Potian's side and gave him a smile. "Tian-ge," she said, "this 'Hand of the Phoenix's Tail' turned out rather efficiently. You used it quite well."

"Why did you not explain things earlier?" Shi Potian asked, shaking his head. "If I had known how severe it would be when I struck someone with it, I would not have learnt it."

Ding Dang's heart sank: This stupid man is having another bout of brainlessness, and talking foolishly again. Then, she said: "Since we are learning martial arts here, it is only natural that the more formidable ones are better. If you did not execute the 'Hand of the Phoenix's Tail' right just now, that man's sword would have pierced your shoulder. If you did not hurt him, he would have hurt you. Do you like hurting others, or being hurt by them? Getting a few teeth punched out is the least serious of injuries. When people fight in the martial arts circle, their lives can be put in danger any time. You have a kind heart, but your opponent does not. If you get yourself killed by a single stab of the sword, what good does a kind heart do?"

"It is best if you teach me a martial arts skill that would not hurt or kill anyone," muttered Shi Potian, "or allow anyone to hurt or kill me. Then, everyone can laugh things off and become good friends instead of enemies."

Ding Dang laughed in exasperation. "What a load of foolish talk!" she said. "Nothing but a mouth full of nonsense! We are pugilists; when we fight, our lives are at stake. Do you think that we are playing hide-and-seek, or playing in mud and sand?"

"I like hide-and-seek, and playing in mud and sand," answered Shi Potian. "I do not like fighting with people and putting lives at stake. It is a pity that I have never had anyone to play hide-and-seek with, and A'Huang does not know how to play it at all."

The more Ding Dang heard, the angrier she became. "You muddle-headed egg!" she snapped. "Anyone who talks to you is totally unfortunate." Thoroughly piqued by now, she decided to pay Shi Potian no further attention and returned to the cabin to get some sleep.

"Is that so?" said Ding Busan. "I have said that he is a moron, and he has eventually turned out to be one. He can have good martial arts skills or poor ones, but he is still a moron. Perhaps, he should be killed as soon as possible, so that he does not anger us further."

Ding Dang thought: If Darling Shi really remains as muddle-headed as he now is for the rest of his life, how am I going to spend my life with him? Perhaps I should just listen to Grandfather, have him killed with a stab of the sabre, and

get some peace and quiet in return.

Then, she thought about the sweet nothings that he would say to her before that major bout of illness. Even if he looked silently at her without uttering a single word, his brows would still be able to communicate and his eyes could talk. His refined manner was indeed akin to the drinking of fine wine, so much so that the heart and soul would be totally intoxicated. Then, after parting ways, the pining and longing that followed often went beyond her control. Never did she expect that the bout of illness would turn the handsome, quick-witted and talented young man into a pedantic and dense block of wood. The more she thought about it, the more frustrated she became. Soon, tears began to drop, prompting her to pull a thin blanket over her head.

"What purpose is there in crying?" asked Ding Busan. "Crying is not going to turn a moron into a gifted scholar!"

"I am going to cry until the brainless moron becomes a smart one!" Ding Dang retorted angrily. "Is that all right?"

"So you are spouting nonsense again!" snapped Ding Busan.

As Ding Dang wept in silence, she thought: Going by the attitude of that Hua Wanzi from the Snow Mountain School and her boiling anger against Darling Shi, it appears that she has not been won over by his charms. How can he be a true man if he can look at a beautiful woman without getting into a dalliance with her? Now that I am married to this disciplined, well-behaved and dense block of wood, what delight do I have left in life?

She cried until midnight before giving the matter more thought: I have already undergone the rites of marriage with him. I am now his lawful wife. During the past few days, he had been focused on practising martial arts. He did not seize any opportunity to touch my body at all when we were practising the moves together. At night, we slept barely a few 'chi' (1 'chi' = 33.33 centimetres) away from each other, but he did not even come over to touch my hands or legs, much less make any attempts to kiss me. How can this be the life of a newly-wedded couple? All right, I will not talk about newly-weds. Even elderly couples in their seventies or eighties would indulge in moments of affection.

Then, her ears heard the sound of Shi Potian sleeping on the stern. His long

and steady breaths indicated such blissful sleep that anger soon rose in her heart. Reaching for her willow-blade sabre (liu3 ye4 dao1) and drawing it gently out of its scabbard, Ding Dang gritted her teeth and said to herself: "What purpose is there in keeping such a dense wood-block of a husband in this world?" Then, walking quietly to the stern, she thought: Darling Shi, Darling Shi, this has come upon you because you have changed. You must not blame me for being ruthless.

Lifting the sabre, Ding Dang prepared to bring it down on Shi Potian's head ... only to feel her heart soften. Hence, she turned him over by the shoulders, so that she could take one last look at him before his death. As Shi Potian turned over in his sleep, the pale moonlight picked out the sweet smile on his face. He looked as if he was having an unknown but rather pleasant dream.

Ding Dang thought: You will die in the blink of an eye, so I can wait for you to finish your pleasant dream before having you killed. After all, there is not much of a difference between doing it now or half a moment later. Thus, she sat down beside him, hugged her knees and gazed at his face. As soon as his smile faded, she would swing her sabre and bring it down on its target.

After a while, she suddenly heard Shi Potian mumbling unconsciously in his sleep: "Ding Ding Dang Dang, why ... why are you angry? But ... but you look very good when you are angry, you are truly ... truly very good-looking ... I can look at you for a hundred days, a thousand days, without getting enough of you, ten thousand days ... a hundred thousand days, no, five thousand days ... would not even be enough..."

Ding Dang could not help but feel ripples of emotion going through her heart as she listened in silence. "Darling Shi, Darling Shi," she said, "so I am constantly on your mind, even when you are asleep. If you speak such pleasant words to me during the day, would it not be wonderful? Sigh, a day will eventually come when your the roots of your confusion and muddle-headedness are healed. Then, you will speak such words to me again."

By and by, Ding Dang noticed that the planks on the side of the boat were moist with dew. Then, when she saw how thin Shi Potian's clothes were, she began to take pity on him. Hence, she pulled a thin blanket out from the cabin and draped it gently over his body. She continued to gaze longingly at him for a

long time before going into the cabin once more.

Ding Busan began to scold his grand-daughter: "It is the third watch (11.00 p.m. to 1.00 a.m.) in the middle of the night, and a small cowardly rat is scurrying here and there. What good is there in thinking about doing something without actually daring to get it done? I wonder: Are you a descendant of my Ding Family?"

Ding Dang knew that her grandfather had seen everything, but she was too happy at that moment to take notice of the old man's sarcastic remarks. All she thought about were these words: But you look very good when you are angry ... I can look at you for a hundred days, a thousand days, without getting enough of you, ten thousand days ... a hundred thousand days, no, five thousand days ... would not even be enough...

Suddenly, she burst into a giggle: Silly Tian-ge, you sound silly even when you speak in your dreams. Even if we live to a hundred years of age, there would only be thirty-six thousand days. Where would the 'one hundred thousand' days of looking come from?

After crying and laughing for half a day, Ding Dang finally fell asleep during the fourth watch (1.00 a.m to 3.00 a.m.). Before long, however, she was jolted awake by Shi Potian's voice.

"Eh, this is strange!" the young man shouted from the stern. "Ding Ding Dang Dang, how did your blanket end up on my body in the middle of the night? Could the blanket have sprouted some legs?"

Greatly embarrassed, Ding Dang leapt out of the cabin and hurried to the stern.

"Ding Ding Dang Dang," said Shi Potian again as he held the thin blanket in his hand, "what do you say? Is this matter not strange? This blanket..."

Ding Dang turned totally red in the face and snatched the blanket away. "Stop it!" she growled in a low voice. "What is there so strange about a blanket that sprouts legs?"

"A blanket that sprouts legs is not strange?" asked Shi Potian. "Where would you say the legs of the blanket are?"

Ding Dang turned her head and caught sight of the old helmsman casting a sidelong glance at her with a smile on his face. Yet, he did not seem to be really smiling at all. At that time, the helmsman was just beginning to steer the boat into deeper water. Ding Dang became so embarrassed that her face looked like a piece of red cloth.

"And you are still going on about it?" she snapped at Shi Potian, before reaching out with her left hand to twist his ear.

Shi Potian raised his right hand and carried out a spontaneous execution of the 'Hand of the Circling Crane' (He4 Xiang2 Shou3) from the eighteen moves of the Seizing Techniques of the Ding Family. Ding Dang responded by turning her right hand over and grabbing him under the ribs with a backhanded grip. In turn, the young man brought his left elbow horizontally across his torso and locked the young woman's grip. Then, he made a grab for her shoulder with his right hand.

Casting the blanket on to the deck, Ding Dang responded with another move. She knew that Shi Potian had a swift-moving and formidable level of internal strength, so she did not allow her hands, palms and arms to come into contact with his fingers and palms.

Within moments, the duo had exchanged more than ten moves. The more Ding Dang fought, the faster her movements became. Shi Potian took everything in with full attentiveness, so much so that nothing escaped him. After many more moves, Ding Dang executed 'The Claw of the Soaring Dragon' (Long2 Teng2 Zhao3) and made a direct grab for the top of Shi Potian's head. The young man turned his wrist over and deflected the move with such amazing speed that the young woman could not withdraw her hand before his five fingers touched an acupoint on her wrist.

Ding Dang felt a strong stream of heated energy running straight from her wrist up her arm and down her torso to her waist. Then, the stream of energy went from her waist straight down to her leg. By then, she could no longer stand steadily. Her body tilted and fell, right on to the thin blanket on the deck.

A spark of childish glee struck Shi Potian. Bending down, he bound Ding Dang in the blanket and picked the entire bundle up. "Why do you want to twist my ear?" he asked with a laugh. "I am going to throw you into the river to feed the

big fish there!"

Despite being separated from Shi Potian by the blanket, Ding Dang could not help but become soft and limp in his embrace. Blushing in embarrassment and delight, she laughed and replied: "You would not dare!"

"Why not?" asked Shi Potian with another laugh, before giving the bundle a light toss and sending it into the cabin of the boat.

Ding Dang crawled out of the blanket and went out to the stern once more. Concerned that she might want to fight again, Shi Potian reacted by taking a step backwards and holding his hands up in a defensive pose.

"I am not playing any more!" said Ding Dang with a smile. "Look at you! Even in putting up a defensive pose, you look just like a farmhand. You do not have the bearing of a highly skilled member of the martial arts circle at all!"

Shi Potian laughed. "I am not a highly skilled member of the martial arts circle in the first place," he said.

"Congratulations, congratulations!" said Ding Dang. "You have learnt this set of seizing techniques to the point of the indigo being better than the blue. As your teacher, I am already not your match."

Just then, Ding Busan's voice was heard from the cabin. "If you want to fight with Bai Wanjian, the highly skilled pugilist of the Snow Mountain School," he said coldly, "you are still a long way off."

"Grandfather, he learns martial arts at such a fast pace," said Ding Dang. "If he studies for a year or so under your tutelage, he would not embarrass you any longer as your grandson-in-law, even if he does not become peerless under the sun."

Ding Busan sneered. "How can the words that Old Ding the Third has spoken be withdrawn?" he asked coldly. "One, I have said before that since he wants to marry you as his wife, he will never have any opportunity to learn my martial arts skills. Two, I have given him ten days to defeat Bai Wanjian. His life will be gone in five days, so what 'year or so' is there to speak about?"

A chill entered Ding Dang's heart. She had wanted to kill Shi Potian with her own hands the night before, but now, she could no longer bear the thought of

her Darling Shi dying in her grandfather's hands. Yet, her grandfather's words had always counted after they were spoken, so what should she do now?

After thinking about the matter from a variety of angles, she decided to continue with the original plan of deriving a way out through the set of seizing techniques and its eighteen moves. Hence, the few days that ensued saw Ding Dang practising the variations of the seizing techniques with Shi Potian. She stopped only to eat and sleep.

On the morning of the eighth day, Ding Busan coughed and said, "There are only three days left."

"Grandfather," said Ding Dang, "so you want him to go and defeat Bai Wanjian. As far as I can tell, it is not a difficult task. Although Bai's Swordplay Technique of the Snow Mountain School is formidable, it still cannot be matched against the martial arts techniques of our Ding Family. Darling Shi has practised the set of seizing techniques almost to the point of using it well. Now, he can take Bai's sword away with his pair of bare hands. If he takes someone's sword away with his bare hands, does that count as victory?"

Ding Busan replied with a sneer. "The little girl speaks with such triviality!" he said coldly. "He can take a sword away from the hand of the 'Frost of the Northwest' with that mere ability? I tell you, you had better stop having the inflated dreams of a clear autumn as soon as possible. Even your grandfather may not be able to relieve Bai of his sword with a pair of bare hands."

"So you are not able to take his sword away," said Ding Dang. "In that case, I think your martial arts skills ... hmmph, hmmph, is probably just ... hmmph, hmmph!"

"What 'hmmph, hmmph'?" growled Ding Busan.

"'Hmmph, hmmph' is 'hmmph, hmmph'," answered Ding Dang, lifting her head and looking up into the sky. "It means that your martial arts skills are formidable."

"What ghastly words are you speaking?" snapped Ding Busan. "'Hmmph, hmmph' means that my martial arts skills are sloppy, trivial, common and ordinary."

"It did not come from me," said Ding Dang. "You called your own martial arts skills 'sloppy, trivial, common and ordinary'."

"You can go 'hmmph, hmpph' or 'ha-ha'," said Ding Busan, "but at the end of it, I will have that moron killed if he is unable to defeat Bai Wanjian in ten days."

Ding Dang pouted with her small mouth. "You want him to defeat Bai Wanjian in ten days," she said, "but if Bai is not found within ten days, Darling Shi cannot be held wrong."

"I have said 'ten days'," replied Ding Busan, "and ten days it will be. If he is found, so be it. If he is not found, so be it. I will have the little moron killed if he is unable to defeat the man in ten days."

"There are only three days left," said Ding Dang anxiously, "but where should we go and look for Bai Wanjian? You ... you ... you are absolutely unreasonable!"

Ding Busan laughed. "If I can be reasoned with," he said, "I would not be called 'Ding Busan'! Go and ask around the realm of the rivers and lakes: When has Ding Busan ever spoken with reason?"

By the ninth day, Ding Busan wore a sliver of a smile on the corner of his mouth. Sometimes, he would cast sidelong glances at Shi Potian with a very strange glint in his eyes. Three-tenths of the glint was scorn, but the remainder was pure murderous intent.

Ding Dang knew that her grandfather would certainly have her Darling Shi killed on the tenth day. To make matters worse, Shi Potian's martial arts abilities were still poles apart from Bai Wanjian's. Even if Shi could defeat Bai, how could the 'Frost of the North-west' be found within two short days, especially when Shi was still floating along on the boundless expanse of the Great River?

+ + +

It was already past the Wu hour (11.00 a.m. to 1.00 p.m.) when Ding Dang and Shi Potian spent some time practising their seizing techniques with each other. As her cheeks became rosy with the exertion, Ding Dang began to yawn. "The weather is still so hot despite being the eighth month," she said as she sat down beside Shi Potian.

By and by, she pointed to two waterfowl that were swimming side-by-side in

the Long River. "Tian-ge," she said, "look at that pair of waterfowl swimming like husband-and-wife in the middle of the river. See how carefree and happy they are! If an arrow kills the cock and leaves its mate all alone, would the hen not be pitiful?"

"I have never thought about animals and fowl being male and female when I hunted them in the mountains," answered Shi Potian. "But since you have mentioned it, I will shoot only the hens when I go fowl-hunting."

Ding Dang sighed: My Darling Shi is dim-witted after all. She yawned once more and leaned against Shi Potian, before placing her head on his shoulder and closing her eyes.

"Ding Ding Dang Dang, are you tired?" asked Shi. "Is it all right if I take you into the cabin so that you can get some sleep?"

"No," mumbled Ding Dang sleepily. "I love sleeping like this."

Finding it inappropriate to brush her off, Shi Potian allowed Ding Dang to use his left shoulder as a pillow. Soon, her breathing began to sound long and relaxed, an indication that she was falling increasingly deeper into slumber. Shi Potian felt a little ticklish when Ding Dang's hair brushed against his left cheek, yet there was also an indescribable comfort in the sensation.

Suddenly, an extremely faint sound floated into his left ear, one that was as light as the buzzing of a bee. "I am talking to you," said the almost-imperceptible voice. "You must only listen. You must not nod your head or say anything in return. In addition, your face must not show any expression of shock or astonishment. It is best if you close your eyes and pretend to be asleep. Then, make some snoring sounds to hide my voice."

Greatly surprised, Shi Potian initially thought that Ding Dang was talking in her sleep. When he cast a sidelong glance at her, he found her long-lashed eyelids closed. Then, quite unexpectedly, her left eye opened, winked twice at him and closed again.

Shi Potian understood at once: So she wants to tell me some secrets without allowing Grandfather in on them. Consequently, he yawned and said, "I am very tired!" Then, he closed his eyes.

Ding Dang was secretly delighted: Tian-ge is not a moron after all. He understood what I wanted as soon as I gave him a hint. He can even pretend to fall asleep with such skill. Then, she whispered: "Grandfather says that your martial arts skills are minimal and poor. He finds you a moron, and thus, unworthy to be his grandson-in-law. The ten-day period comes to an end tomorrow, and he is certain to have you killed. Yet, we cannot find Bai Wanjian. Even if we could, you would still be unable to defeat him. The only way out is by making an escape. Both of us must flee and hide away in the remote mountains, so that Grandfather is unable to find you.

Shi Potian thought: Everything is going on fine, so why does Grandfather want to kill me? Ding Ding Dang Dang is a child after all, for she has taken Grandfather's joke as the truth. But her suggestion of hiding away in the remote mountains so that Grandfather is unable to find us, seems like a lot of fun.

All his life, Shi Potian had lived with only one other person in the most remote of mountains. Thus, he felt that nothing was more natural than such an existence. In addition, his recent experiences had left him feeling so frustrated and lost that he longed to return to the wilderness. Now, he could not help but feel very excited at the thought of having the beautiful and adorable Ding Ding Dang Dang for company for the rest of his life.

Ding Dang spoke again: "If both of us go ashore and run away, Grandfather will certainly be able to track us down. Therefore, we will not escape his clutches regardless of what we do. Now remember: During the third watch (11.00 p.m. to 1.00 a.m.) tonight, I will grab Grandfather suddenly and cry, 'Grandfather, spare Darling Shi! Do not kill him, do not kill him!' You must dash into the cabin at once. Execute 'The Hand of the Tiger's Claw' (Hu3 Zhao3 Shou3) with your right hand and grab the exact centre of Grandfather's back. At the same time, execute 'The Jade Maiden Picks a Needle Up' (Yu4 Nü3 Nian1 Zhen1) with your left hand and get a grip on the small of his back. Remember, you must act quickly when you hear me shout 'Do not kill him!'. Use 'The Hand of the Tiger's Claw' and 'The Jade Maiden Picks a Needle Up'. Grandfather will not be able to fend you off because I will be holding his arms down. Once you grab him, your rich internal strength will keep him from moving."

Shi Potian thought: Ding Ding Dang Dang is really mischievous, asking me to

help her play such a big prank on Grandfather. I wonder: Will he be angry? Well, it does not matter. Since she wants to play, I will go along with her and do as she says. Come to think of it, the prank will be very interesting indeed.

Ding Dang whispered once more: "These acts of grabbing and gripping are linked to our lives and deaths. Now, use your left hand to touch the Ling Tai (Ling2 Tai2) acupoint in the centre of my back. That is the spot on which 'The Hand of the Tiger's Claw' must be used."

Keeping his eyes closed, Shi Potian lifted his left hand slowly and gave Ding Dang's Ling Tai acupoint a gentle rub.

"Yes, that is the one," said Ding Dang. "You have to move quickly in the dark and identify the acupoint accurately. I will be holding Grandfather with all that I have, but it will be effective only for a twinkling. Once he has been alerted, he will push me aside. By then, you will find it extremely difficult to get a grip on him. Now, touch the Xuan Shu (Xuan2 Shu1) acupoint in the small of my back, so that I can see if you have gotten it correct."

Shi Potian moved his left hand slowly down Ding Dang's back and gave her Xuan Shu acupoint a gentle scratch with two of his fingers. He did not use any internal strength, of course, but the scratch was too much for Ding Dang who was both a virgin and rather afraid of tickling. Bursting into a giggle, she said, "You are mischievous!"

As Shi Potian responded with laughter and mirth, Ding Dang reached out and tickled him under the ribs. Within moments, the duo had forgotten all about pretending to be asleep.

+ + +

At dusk, the old helmsman moored the boat at the edge of a small riverside town. Then, he went ashore to buy some wine and vegetables.

"Tian-ge," said Ding Dang, "let us go ashore for a stroll as well."

"Very well!" answered Shi Potian, as Ding Dang took his hand and led him ashore.

The town had only eighty or ninety families, but more than ten of them were involved in the fishing industry.

When Shi Potian and Ding Dang reached the end of the town and found no one there, the young man said, "Now that Grandfather is sleeping in the cabin on the boat, are we not making an escape by walking off like this?" By then, all he hoped for was simply to return to the remote mountains with Ding Dang at the earliest opportunity.

"How can it be so easy?" Ding Dang remarked with a shake of her head. "He can still catch up with us even if we manage to travel ten or twenty li (5 or 10 km)."

"That is correct," a hoarse voice said suddenly behind their backs. "You could travel a thousand li (500 km) or even ten thousand (5,000 km), but we would still be able to track you down."

Shi Potian and Ding Dang turned around, and saw two men with menacing grins coming out from behind a large tree. The sight was especially frightening to Shi Potian, for he recognised the men as Huyan Wanshan and Wen Wanfu from the Snow Mountain School.

As it turned out, two disciples of the Snow Mountain School had tracked Shi Potian down on the Long River earlier, and boarded his boat. During the scuffle that ensued, one of these disciples had become seriously wounded. After Bai Wanjian got wind of the matter, he had sent his younger brothers-at-arms out in pursuit on both land and water. Huyan Wanshan and Wen Wanfu had ridden westward along the river, and had eventually come upon Shi Potian in the small riverside town.

Huyan Wanshan was a prudent man. He was certain that neither of them were necessarily Shi's match when it came to martial arts skills. Hence, he had wanted to follow his Elder Brother Bai's instructions and launch a rocket into the sky to alert the other members of his school. Unfortunately, Wen Wanfu had been too impatient to wait. Thus, he had shouted at their quarries as soon as he could.

Ding Dang was startled too: These two men are disciples of the Snow Mountain School. I wonder: Is Bai Wanjian in the vicinity? If Bai appears, Grandfather will force Darling Shi to fight with him. That would be terrible indeed! Then, glaring at the men with the corner of her eye, she snapped: "We are talking among ourselves. Who needs your interruption? Tian-ge, let us return

to the boat."

Shi Potian, who was already feeling intimidated, nodded in agreement. Then, he turned and walked off with Ding Dang.

Wen Wanfu, who had always despised this particular nephew-at-arms of his, thought: Elder Brother Wang Wanren and Elder Brother Zhang Wanfeng were both defeated by this little rascal, so I do not know what they were up to. If the rascal is indeed highly skilled in martial arts, how could he have been captured by Elder Brother Bai in a single move? I will capture the rascal today, earn myself a great amount of merit and henceforth, stand out among the members of my school.

Thus, Wen Wanfu shouted after his quarry: "Where are you going? You, the rascal who is surnamed Shi! You had better come with me, like a dear little child would!" At the same time, he made a grab for Shi Potian's shoulder with his left hand.

Shi Potian avoided the oncoming grasp by turning his body sideways. Then, using the seizing techniques that Ding Dang had taught him, he deflected Wen Wanfu's hand with a horizontal move of the arm.

Having missed his target in the first move, Wen raised his leg and kicked out at Shi's abdomen, an attack that the latter had never learnt to respond to.

By then, Shi had spent half the day thinking repeatedly about 'The Hand of the Tiger's Claw' and 'The Jade Maiden Picks a Needle Up'. Now pressed for a response, he thought only of these two moves as well. However, with Wen standing face-to-face with him, he could not use these moves that targeted the opponent's back. Yet, he quickly proceeded to get behind his opponent, for he could not be bothered about the appropriateness of the moves at a time like this. He had a rich and profound level of internal strength that gave him incomparable speed in movement. Hence, he avoided Wen's kick as soon as he dashed away. At the same time, he grabbed Wen's Ling Tai and Xuan Shu acupoints by executing 'The Hand of the Tiger's Claw' with his right hand and 'The Jade Maiden Picks a Needle Up' with his left respectively. Wen shook a little when he was struck by Shi's internal strength; then, he fell to the ground.

Huyan Wanshan had wanted to enter the fray, but when he suddenly saw Shi

Potian holding the vital acupoints on his younger brother's body, he became so concerned that he did not even wait to unsheath his sword. He simply went up and sent his fist into Shi's waist with all his strength. The fist struck with a *po*, followed by a *ka-cha*. Huyan's right arm broke.

On the other hand, Shi Potian did not feel any pain on his waist. When he released Wen Wanfu, he saw the latter curling up into an immobile ball. Turning him over by the shoulder, he found Wen's eyes in a horrifying stare. Shocked, Shi Potian said, "A-yo! This is bad! Ding Ding Dang Dang, why has he ... he become all cramped up? Could he be dead?"

Ding Dang answered with a laugh. "Tian-ge," she said, "you used the two moves very well, but the panicky way in which these moves were executed was just too unsightly. This man will not die from your strikes, but he will not be spared from disability. His arms and legs would have to be given medical treatment for a year or so."

"I am really ... really sorry," said Shi Potian, reaching out to hold Wen Wanfu. "I did not mean to hurt you, so what should I do now? Ding Ding Dang Dang, we have to find a way to cure him."

"So do you want him to suffer less?" asked Ding Dang. "That would be very easy." She pulled Wen's sword out of its scabbard and said, "Just have him killed with a single stab!"

"No, no!" said Shi Potian at once.

As for Huyan Wanshan, he reacted to the suggestion with anger. "Shameless little goblins!" he roared. "The disciples of the Snow Mountain School can be killed, but never humiliated. Since my brother and I have fallen into your hands today, just hurry up and have both of us killed. Why utter so many annoying words?"

Shi Potian took the sword from Ding Dang's hand as quickly as he could, for he was deeply afraid that she would really have Wen Wanfu killed. Pushing the blade slightly into the ground, he said, "Ding Ding Dang Dang, hurry, let us leave." Then, he pulled Ding Dang by her sleeve and walked quickly towards their boat.

"People say that Leader Shi from the Clan of Eternal Happiness is vicious in his

thoughts and ruthless in his acts," said Ding Dang sarcastically. "He kills people without batting an eyelid, but why has he suddenly become as sentimental as an old woman? You had better not tell Grandfather about what happened just now."

"No, I will not," said Shi Potian. "That man back there -- do you really mean that his arms and legs will eventually be crippled?"

"Well, you grabbed two of his vital acupoints," answered Ding Dang. "If that did not cripple him, what purpose is there in the eighteen moves that make up the Seizing Techniques of our Ding Family?"

"Why then did you ask me to grab Grandfather in the same manner?" asked Shi Potian again.

Ding Dang smiled. "Silly man," she said. "Who do you think Grandfather is? How can he be compared with the pus-filled good-for-nothings from the Snow Mountain School? If you are fortunate enough to grab these two acupoints on Grandfather's body, and exert some internal strength on them, you would be able to immobilise him for three shichen (6 hours) at the most. Do you really think that you could cripple him?"

Yet, Shi Potian remained very much disturbed as the image of Wen Wanfu's horrifying appearance played on in his mind.

+ + +

Shi Potian spent the evening drifting in and out of sleep. At midnight, he heard Ding Dang shouting from the cabin just as she had planned: "Grandfather, Grandfather, spare Darling Shi's life! Do not kill him, do not kill him!" Leaping to his feet, Shi Potian dashed into the cabin and saw Ding Dang holding Ding Busan's torso in the murky darkness. At the same time, she kept on shouting, "Grandfather, do not kill Darling Shi!"

The young man reached out with both his hands, but when he was about to grab Ding Busan's back, he suddenly remembered the horror of seeing Wen Wanfu all curled up into a ball. He thought: If Grandfather ends up like that after I grab him with my hands, I would have done him a great disservice. I ... I must not carry this plan out. Hence, he retreated quietly from the cabin at once and went back to sleep.

As for Ding Dang, she was initially delighted because Shi Potian had entered the cabin at the right moment. Yet, he had left after a moment's hesitation, an outcome that she had not expected at all. Success was within her grasp, but now, she was left with failure. Thus, she could not help but feel frustrated and angry at the same time.

Meanwhile, Shi Potian's heart thumped wildly as he lay in the stern. After a while, he heard Ding Dang say, "A-yo, Grandfather, why am I holding you? I ... I had a nightmare just now, and saw you killing Darling Shi. I begged you ... you to spare his life, but you did not agree. Thank the Heavens and the Earth; it was just a dream."

Then, he heard Ding Busan say, "If it was a dream, so be it. If it was not, so be it. Once the sky is bright, it will be the tenth day that we have agreed on. Let us see if he can find Bai Wanjian and have him defeated within the day."

Ding Dang sighed. "I know that Darling Shi is not a moron!" she said.

"Yes, he has a kind conscience!" said Ding Busan. "A man with a kind conscience is a fool, and a fool is a moron. He certainly deserves damnation and death. Sigh, grabbing the Ling Tai acupoint with 'The Hand of the Tiger's Claw' and the Xuan Shu acupoint with 'The Jade Maiden Picks a Needle Up' ... an excellent plan, an excellent plan indeed! What a pity that the moron has a conscience so kind that he could not bear to carry the plan out."

The last two sentences gave both Ding Dang and Shi Potian an enormous shock as soon as they heard it: How did Grandfather know about our plan?

While Shi Potian did not react much beyond the initial shock, Ding Dang could not help but burst into cold sweat. She thought: So Grandfather knew about the plan way ahead of time. Hence, he would have certainly made preparations to deal with it. I wonder: Was it good or bad that Tian-ge did not act just now?

On his part, the muddle-headed Shi Potian did not believe that Ding Busan would have him killed the following day. Then, without much ado, he fell asleep.

+ + +

Barely after daybreak, loud shouts were heard coming from the bank of the river: "Here it is!" "This is the boat!" "Do not let the old monster escape!"

Shi Potian sat up, and saw more than ten people on the bank with lanterns and torches in their hands. The people approached the boat at a fast pace, and before long, the first four or five men had climbed on to the bow.

"Where is the old monster?" they shouted. "Where has the goblin who harms all men gone?"

Ding Busan came out of the cabin and roared in return: "What creatures are making such a racket here?"

"It is he, it is he!" shouted one of the men. "Hurry, splash him with it!"

Two men stepped out from behind the first with bamboo contraptions that looked like modern-day spray-guns, took aim at Ding Busan and shot him with gushing streams of blood.

"The blood of black dogs has struck the old monster!" shouted the people on the bank with glee. "He can no longer escape!"

Yet, how could these two streams of dogs' blood hit Ding Busan? As the old man leapt away, anger filled his heart: Where have these ignorant and presumptuous people come from? How could they think that I am a monster that must be splashed with the blood of black dogs?

Ding Busan would often raise his hand and kill a man at whim, so now that these townspeople had come all the way to antagonise him, how could things be any different? Hence, he kicked out with his feet as he landed on the deck, and struck the two men with the bamboo contraptions. Then, he sent his palm out and caused the first man to fly all the way off the boat. The three men did not know any martial arts at all, so how could they live after being attacked by this strange but outstanding resident of the realm of the rivers and lakes?

The two victims of Ding Busan's kicks died there and then on the bow of the boat, while the one who was thrown off the boat vomitted copious amounts of blood even in mid-air.

When Ding Busan began raising his fists and feet against the remaining people, he heard Ding Dang's cold voice behind him: "Grandfather, not more than three a day!"

The old man was taken aback, for he had been so infuriated that he had almost

forgotten the oath sworn years ago. Hence, he forced himself to withdraw the foot that had gone within a chi (33.33 centimetres) of the townspeople on the bow.

By then, the townspeople were scared out of their wits. "The old monster is so formidable!" they shouted. "Run! Run!" Within moments, they were all gone, their lanterns and torches cast either into the river or on to the ground. The three corpses -- one on land and two on the boat -- were left behind as well.

Ding Busan kicked the corpses on the boat into the river. Then, he turned to the helmsman and said, "Set sail quickly, for I cannot kill anyone else who comes by."

The command frightened the helmsman so much that his hands could not stop trembling. He did not seem to have any strength to steer the boat as well. Consequently, Ding Busan picked the bamboo steering pole up and pushed the boat away from the shore.

Although the dogs' blood had not struck its target, it had splashed into the cabin and left an unbearable odour there.

Ding Busan turned to his grand-daughter and asked in a cold voice: "A'Dang, why did you come up with such mischief?"

"Grandfather, do you mean what you say?" asked Ding Dang in return, a smile on her lips.

"When have I not meant what I say?" asked Ding Busan.

"All right," answered Ding Dang, "you said that you would have Darling Shi killed at the end of the ten-day period if he does not defeat the one who is surnamed Bai. It is the tenth day today, but you have already killed three people!" Feeling pleased with herself, the young woman smiled and went on: "The Third Master of the Ding Family has always meant what he says. You say that you would have this rascal here killed on the tenth day, yet you have 'Not More Than Three A Day'. You have already killed three people today, and he would be the fourth. Therefore, he cannot be killed. Since you cannot kill him on the tenth day, you cannot have him killed in the future as well. As far as I can see, this grandson-in-law of yours is not really a moron. He will recover gradually, and when that happens, there will naturally be a great advancement in his

martial arts skills. I assure you, your dignity and reputation will be preserved."

Ding Busan lifted his foot and stomped hard on the bow. As the planks beneath his foot broke with a *ka*, he roared in anger: "That will not do, that will not do! Ding Busan has already lost his dignity, for he has been defeated by a little girl!"

"I am your grand-daughter," said Ding Dang with a smile. "We are family, so what dignity is there to lose? Besides, I will not tell anyone about the matter."

"I become upset when I lose," snapped Ding Busan. "What does it have to do with you telling people or keeping quiet about it?"

"Then, let us take it that you have won," said Ding Dang.

"Losing is losing," said Ding Busan. "Winning is winning. I am not that good-for-nothing Fourth Grandfather of yours. When we fought as children, he would blow his own whistle and say that he had won even when he had lost."

Listening to the exchange between the old man and his grand-daughter, Shi Potian finally understood what was going on. As it turned out, Ding Dang had led the townspeople to the boat with the intention of having them killed by her grandfather. After the old man had killed three of the townspeople, he would be stopped by his oath of 'Not More Than Three A Day' from killing Shi himself. Now that he had seen the cruel, ferocious and rapid manner in which Ding Busan had killed the three people, the threat to have him killed was probably not a joke.

Hence, when Shi Potian saw Ding Dang walking to the stern with a grin on her face, he said, "Ding Ding Dang Dang, you caused the death of three people for no good reason because you wanted to save my life. Is that not ... not too cruel?"

Ding Dang's countenance darkened. "You caused it!" she answered. "Why are you turning around and putting the blame on me?"

"I ... I caused it?" asked Shi Potian, feeling somewhat exasperated.

"How could it be otherwise?" asked Ding Dang in return. "When things came to a head last night, you did not dare to follow through. If you had done it, both of us would have been gone long and far by now. Then, would those three innocent people have needed to die?"

Shi Potian found her words true; hence, he did not have anything to say for a while.

Suddenly, Ding Busan's laughter was heard: "Ha-ha, I have got it, I have got it! You, the little rascal who is surnamed Shi! Your grandfather will gouge your eyeballs out and chop both your arms off, so that you are unable to die even if you want to, but live on as a useless cripple! So long as I do not take your life, I would not be breaking my oath of 'Not More Than Three A Day'."

Ding Dang and Shi Potian looked at each other, as the expressions on their faces underwent a great change.

"What an excellent idea!" said Ding Busan, feeling increasingly pleased with himself as he thought deeper about his plan. "What an excellent idea! Little moron, I will not kill you, but I will ensure that you become a man who does not look like a man, and a ghost that does not look like a ghost. A'Dang, that would be acceptable, would it not?"

Unable to come up with a counter-argument, Ding Dang said, "The tenth day is not over yet. Perhaps we will run into Bai Wanjian later, and Darling Shi will have him defeated."

"That is correct, that is correct," said Ding Busan, cackling with laughter. "We must work through this deal in a fair and just manner, without cheating the young and the old. Your grandfather will wait until the third watch (11.00 p.m. to 1.00 a.m.) tonight before taking any action."

+ + +

Now weighed down with anxiety, Ding Dang could no longer think of another plan to help Shi Potian escape the impending danger. To make matters worse, Shi Potian acted as if he did not know that a great disaster was about to befall him.

"Why are you wearing a frown on your brow?" he asked Ding Dang. "Are you worried about something?"

"Did you not hear what Grandfather said?" snapped the young woman. "He wants to gouge your eyeballs out and chop both your arms off!"

Shi Potian laughed. "Grandfather is just trying to scare us with his jokes," he

said, "but you are taking it as truth! What purpose is there in him gouging my eyeballs out and chopping both my arms off? Besides, I have not offended him."

Ding Dang, who was already annoyed, became furious: This man acts like a sentimental old woman, and his brain is totally muddled. If I live out my days with him, life will be very uninteresting. Since Grandfather wants to have him killed, I may as well allow him to die. Then, she thought: If I change my mind and want him again after Grandfather has gouged his eyeballs out and chopped both his arms off, I would end up being married to a husband without eyes and arms. That would be even more unpalatable.

As the sun sank slowly into the west, Ding Dang sat facing the stern and watched as her shadow and that of Shi Potian floated on the surface of the river. The shadows looked as if they were swimming right behind the boat as it sailed west.

When Ding Dang turned towards Shi Potian and found him sitting with his back towards her, she reached out and made a grab for the vital acupoints on his back. Holding his Ling Tai acupoint in her right hand with 'The Hand of the Tiger's Claw' and his Xuan Shu acupoint in her left with 'The Jade Maiden Picks a Needle Up', she succeeded in immobilising him because he was caught totally unprepared. While he felt a numbing ache all over his body, she found herself being thrown back by his internal strength.

Grabbing the sail with a hand to stop herself from falling into the river, Ding Dang began scolding Shi Potian: "Grandfather wants to gouge your eyeballs out and chop both your arms off! Even if a useless fool like you can be left in this world without being an embarrassment to Grandfather, I would still be too ashamed to see anyone. Grandfather does not need to take any action, for I will gouge your eyeballs out myself!"

Then, Ding Dang took a long rope from the stern and bound Shi Potian's hands and feet. Then, she wound the rope tightly around him, from his shoulders right down to his legs. The rope was coiled at least eighty or ninety times, causing Shi Potian to end up looking like an enormous rice dumpling.

Anyone who had his acupoints grabbed in this manner could hardly open his mouth to speak, but Shi Potian's rich and profound level of internal strength

enabled him to talk even when his limbs could not move. "Ding Ding Dang Dang, are you playing with me?" he asked.

Despite his light-hearted question, he knew that something was terribly wrong from the vicious expression on Ding Dang's face. Hence, a pitiful expression began to appear in his eyes.

Ding Dang gave him a ferocious kick in the waist and said, "Hmph, am I playing with you? Death is upon you, yet you are still having the inflated dreams of a clear autumn. There is no injustice when I have a stupid fool like you dismembered into a ten thousand pieces with a thousand sabres." She withdrew her willow-blade sabre with a *sou* and rubbed it twice against Shi Potian's forehead, as if she was having the weapon sharpened.

Shi Potian was greatly astonished. "Ding Ding Dang Dang, I will listen to you from now on," he said. "If you kill me, I ... I will not come alive again!"

"Who wants you to come alive again?" snapped Ding Dang heartlessly. "I intended to save your life, but you insisted on disobeying my instructions. You chose the road to death yourself, so who else can you blame? If I do not kill you now, Grandfather will. Hmph, you are my husband and I should be the one to kill you myself. If someone else does the deed, I will not be happy for the rest of my life."

"Do spare me," said Shi Potian. "I will not be your husband anymore." His words were an impassioned plea, but since he was taught by his mother never to beseech another, he did not utter the word 'beg' at all.

"We have already paid our respects to the Heavens and the Earth in a rite of marriage," said Ding Dang. "How can you not be my husband? If you continue talking, I will chop that cursed dog-head of yours off with my sabre!"

Shi Potian was so frightened that he clammed up at once.

Then, he heard Ding Busan's voice. "Very good, very good!" the old man said with a laugh. "Very wonderful indeed! Now that is how the dear grand-daughter of Ding Busan should act: Frank, outright and cut cleanly into two with a single stroke of the sabre!"

Unfortunately, Ding Dang's act of raising her sabre frightened the old

helmsman so much that he shook from head to toe. As the rudder in his hands went askew, the boat cut diagonally across the river, right into the path of a smaller vessel that was being swept along by the currents. A collision was imminent.

"Pull the rudder, pull the rudder!" shouted the helmsman of the smaller boat.

When Ding Dang lifted her sabre once again, the setting sun reflected off its blade into Shi Potian's eyes. As Shi Potian reacted to the glare by narrowing his eyes, he saw Ding Dang's arm coming down at a hurried pace. *Pai* The sabre missed its target, sinking into the planks several cun (1 cun = 3.33 centimetres) beside Shi's head.

Then, Ding Dang released her grip on the sabre, took Shi Potian in both her hands and hurled him as hard as she could towards the cabin of the vessel that was passing by.

"What ... what are you doing?" shouted Ding Busan in anger. He had not expected his grand-daughter to execute such a trick at all, so he leapt quickly out of the cabin and pounced towards Shi Potian. Then, he reached out to grab the young man to no avail.

The currents in the river were so swift that the two boats were already more than ten zhang (33.33 metres) apart in a twinkling. Hence, regardless of how highly skilled Ding Busan was in qinggong, he could not jump across the expanse that separated the two vessels. Infuriated, the old man turned around and gave Ding Dang a tight slap.

"Turn the rudder, turn the rudder!" he roared at the helmsman. "Get that boat!"

But with such strong winds and swift currents in the middle of the Long River, how could any helmsman turn the rudder around in a mere instant? In addition, the lighter body of the smaller boat enabled it to move a lot faster and go increasingly further away, until it could no longer be caught up with.

Definitions, explanations and/or words left (mostly) in their original form:

Those covered in earlier chapters are not repeated.

Medicine for metal-inflicted wounds (金疮药 jin1 chuang1 yao4) = A common type of medicine for treating wounds caused by weapons; usually found in powder form.

Chapter 9 - The Big Rice Dumpling

In a flash of inspiration, Ding Busi raised both his hands and sent the force of his palms into the sky. Shi Potian did the same, hitting upwards with both his palms in a loud *hu*. Then, with their palms still facing the sky, the men looked at each other.

The wind swept past Shi Potian's ears with *hu-hu* sounds as his body moved through the air along a semi-circular trajectory. Landing with his face downwards, he could tell that he had fallen on something very soft. Hence, he did not suffer any pain upon impact. The inky darkness of his surroundings did not allow him to see anything at all, but he could hear someone uttering a cry of alarm by his ear.

He could not move his body, yet he did not dare to open his mouth and speak. Then, he noticed a delicate fragrance wafting into his nostrils, as if he had returned to his own bed at the Clan of Eternal Happiness.

Focusing his thoughts a little, he realised that he was indeed lying on some bedding. His nose and mouth were pressed against a pillow, on which another person's head lay. From the mass of long hair that was spread out around the pillow, the other person appeared to be a woman.

"Ah!" cried Shi Potian in alarm.

"Who is that?" a woman's voice asked in return. "How ... how could you..."

"I ... I ...," Shi Potian began, but he did not know what to say after that.

"How could you have made your way on to our boat?" asked the woman. "I will have you killed with a slash of the sabre!"

"No, no!" shouted Shi Potian. "I did not make my way on to your boat by myself. Someone threw me here."

"Then, you ... you had better get out quickly," said the woman in an irritated voice. "How could you crawl into the folds of my quilt!"

As Shi Potian focused his thoughts again, he realised that his chest was indeed pressed against a cotton-padded mattress. There was a quilt on his back and a

pillow against his face. The warmth of the bedding told him that he had, by sheer coincidence, fallen through the door of the cabin on the small boat after Ding Dang tossed him away. Then, somehow, he had landed right under the folds of the quilt. To make things worse, the way in which the woman spoke seemed to indicate that the quilt belonged to her!

If his hands and feet had not been bound, he would have leapt up and fled a long time ago. Unfortunately, the acupoints on his body were still blocked, so he could not lift even a single finger. Hence, all he could do was to say: "I cannot move. Please, I beg you, move me out. You can push me or give me a kick; either way will be fine."

A voice, which seemed to belong to an elderly woman, cut in from the ends of Shi Potian's feet: "What nonsense is this scoundrel talking about? Kill him with the sabre, quickly!"

"Paternal Grandmother(1)," said the woman, "if he is killed, the folds of my quilt will all be stained with blood. What ... what am I going to do after that?" She sounded really worried about the consequences of her grandmother's suggestion.

"What ghastly creature is that?" roared the old woman in anger. "Hey, scoundrel, you had better crawl out quickly!"

"I am really unable to move," said Shi Potian in exasperation. "Look, I have been grabbed on the Ling Tai acupoint and struck on the Xuan Shi acupoint. I have also been bound so well and tight that I cannot move even half a fen (0.33 centimetres). This young lady or madame here, you had better get up quickly. It is not ... not too wonderful for us to be sleeping in the folds of the same quilt."

"What 'madame'?" snapped the woman. "I am a young lady. I cannot move either. Grandmother, you ... you had better come up with a plan quickly. This man has really been bound up."

"Elderly Madame," said Shi Potian, "I beg you, please drag me outside. I ... I have offended this young lady ... sigh, I am really sorry."

"So the little scoundrel is now speaking irresponsible and sarcastic words!" roared the old woman again.

"Grandmother, shall we call the boatman from the stern and get him to carry the man out?" asked the young woman.

"No, no," answered the old woman. "How can we allow outsiders to see this awful mess? Since both of us are also unable to move, this ... this...."

A thought struck Shi Potian: Could it be that this Elderly Madame and the young woman are both bound up?

By then, the old woman could not stop cursing Shi Potian: "Little scoundrel, stinking scoundrel, why do you not choose another boat? Why must you force your way into ours? A'Xiu, go ahead and have him killed. Who cares about blood in the folds of the quilt anyway? After all, this man would have to be killed sooner or later."

"I do not have the strength to kill anyone," said the young woman.

"Take the sabre and slowly saw at his neck until his throat is cut," said the old woman. "Then, the little scoundrel will no longer live."

"No, no!" shouted Shi Potian. "My blood is so dirty that it will make a complete mess of this fragrant bedding. Besides ... besides, it is not very good to have a dead corpse in the folds of one's quilt."

A gasp was heard, as if the young woman found the words 'dead corpse in the folds of one's quilt' very frightening. As Shi Potian's heart leapt in delight, he heard the young woman say: "Grandmother, I do not have the strength even to lift the sabre."

"Nothing is better than you not having the strength to lift the sabre," said Shi Potian at once. "Since I am unable to move at the moment, I will become a petrified corpse if you kill me. Then, it will be so much more terrifying for me to lie beside you. I cannot move now, but when I become a petrified corpse, I will be able to do so. Then, I will reach out with the icy-cold hands of a petrified corpse and grasp you by the throat..."

Terrified, the young woman quickly said, "I will not kill you, I will not kill you!" Then, after a moment, she asked: "Grandmother, how are we going to find a way so that he gets out?"

"I am thinking about it," the old woman answered. "Do not talk more than

necessary."

By then, it was already night, and the cabin of the boat had plunged into complete darkness.

Although Shi Potian was covered by the same quilt as the young woman, he had been fortunate to land at an angle that did not cause him to touch her body. All he could hear in the darkness was the woman's fast-paced breathing, an obvious indication that she was very frightened and worried.

A long time passed, but the old woman had not come up with any ideas.

Suddenly, two sharp whistles rang out from the distance. Sounding very sorrowful yet ear-piercing in the stillness of the night, these whistles were followed by a burst of laughter from an old and throaty voice. As the owner of that voice laughed, he called: "Xiaocui, I have waited for you for a day and a night. Why have you arrived only at this hour?"

"Grandmother," gasped the young woman in the cabin, "he ... he has come! What are we going to do?"

The old woman snorted in disgust. "Do not make another sound," she replied. "I am in the midst of accumulating and concentrating the strength in my body. Once the channels in my feet are slightly unblocked and I can move a little, I will jump right into the middle of the river to avoid being humiliated by that old goblin."

"Grandmother, Grandmother," said the young woman frantically, "you cannot do that!"

"I have told you not to disturb me," snapped the old woman angrily. "When your grandmother jumps into the river, are you going to follow her?"

After a moment's hesitation, the young woman replied: "I ... I will follow my grandmother, and die together with her."

"Good!" said the old woman. She fell silent after that.

Shi Potian, who had suffered from two previous incidences of overpractising, thought: So this Elderly Madame and the young woman have both overpractised when they were training in internal strength techniques. Therefore, they are now

unable to move. To make things worse, their enemy is here. This will only make the situation more difficult.

Just then, the old and throaty voice downstream spoke again: "If you want to have a contest of swords, so be it. If you want to have a fight with fists, so be it. Old Ding the Fourth will certainly accompany you to the end. Xiaocui, why do you not answer me?" The voice had come several dozen zhang (1 zhang = 3.33 metres) nearer.

Shortly after that, the clanging of iron chains was heard. Then, a thud sounded, as if something had dropped on to the boat. As it turned out, someone on the other boat had thrown an anchor and its chain onboard.

"Hey, hey, what are you doing?" shouted the boatman from the stern. "What are you doing?"

Shi Potian felt the boat tilting rapidly towards the right, so much so that he too rolled involuntarily in the same direction. The young woman followed, coming to a stop against his body.

"This ... this ...," Shi Potian began, "... you" He wanted to tell the woman not to lean against him, but when he remembered that she too could not move, he swallowed the words that had reached the tip of his tongue.

Then, Shi felt the bow of the boat sinking into the water for a brief moment, before righting itself. Someone had just jumped on to the boat.

The visitor called out from the bow: "Xiaocui, I have come. Are we going to start fighting now?"

"Now that you have done that," shouted the boatman from the stern again, "both the boats will capsize!"

"Shut your cursed mouth, you dog-thief!" roared the visitor in anger, lifting the anchor and tossing it away.

The two boats drifted apart at once, and began gliding downstream along with the currents of the river.

The boatman was shocked to see the supernatural strength that the elderly visitor possessed, for the latter could throw the 200-jin (100 kg) anchor around

as if it did not weigh a thing. Unable to even pull his tongue (which he had stuck out earlier in astonishment) back into his mouth, the boatman did not dare to make further remarks.

"Xiaocui, I am waiting for you on the bow," said the old man with a laugh. "You must be preparing an ambush in the cabin, but I will not fall for it."

Shi Potian heaved a sigh of relief, for he thought that the old man would not be entering the cabin just yet. Hence, the occupants of the cabin would be safe for a while. But as quickly as the first thought had come, the second one arose: Waiting might not necessarily be a good idea after all, because the old woman had spoken about jumping into the river with the young woman in suicide once her strength is concentrated enough.

Since the young woman's ear was just beside his mouth, Shi Potian whispered: "Guniang, tell your grandmother not to jump into the river."

"She ... she will not change her mind," said the young woman. "She will definitely jump into the river regardless of what I say." She became so saddened by the thought that tears began to flow from her eyes. Once these tears fell, the young woman could not help but burst into choking sobs. When her tears moistened Shi Potian's cheek, she said, "I ... I am sorry! My tears have fallen on your face." Despite the circumstances, the young woman had turned out to be unexpectedly refined and polite.

Shi Potian sighed. "You need not treat me with such politeness," he said. "What are a few drops of tears anyway?"

"I am unwilling to die," sobbed the young woman. "But the man on the bow is so vicious that Grandmother would rather die than fall into his hands. My ... my tears ... I am really sorry, please do not take any offence..."

Just then, the planks beneath them creaked. A shadowy figure sat up in the cabin.

Shi Potian's mouth and eyes were initially facing downwards into the pillow, but after the roll, he found himself lying on his side. When he saw the figure sitting up, his heart began to beat wildly. "Guniang...", he stammered, "... Guniang, your grandmother has sat up."

The young woman gasped. She could not see what was going on because she was facing Shi Potian.

Moments later, Shi Potian could be heard shouting: "Elderly Madame, please do not take her. She is unwilling to jump into the river in suicide with you. Help, help!"

"Who is that, shouting high and low?" asked the old man on the bow, surprised to hear the voice of a young man coming from the cabin.

"Come in quickly and save them!" said Shi Potian. "The Elderly Madame is about to throw herself into the river in suicide."

Greatly startled, the old man struck the fabric canopy of the cabin with his palm. Then, he reached out with his right hand and grabbed the arm of the old woman. The strength that the old woman had spent half the day accumulating in her body dispersed immediately, and she collapsed.

When the old man took the old woman's pulse, he had another shock. "Xiaocui, did you overpractise while you were training in internal strength techniques?" he asked. "Why did you not tell me about it earlier? Why did you force yourself to act strong instead?"

"Let me go!" snapped the old woman as she gasped for breath. "Leave me alone. Get out!"

"But your energy channels are all reversed," said the old man. "That is very dangerous, for if early treatment is not given, I am afraid ... afraid that you will become a cripple. Let me lend you a helping hand."

"If you touch me one more time," said the old woman angrily, "I will bite my tongue and kill myself!"

The old man quickly withdrew his hand. "Your Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung, Hand Shaoyin Channel of the Heart and Hand Shaoyang Channel of the Three Visceral Cavities have all been messed up," he said. "This ... this..."

"You have always wanted to defeat me with all your heart and mind," said the old woman. "Now that I have suffered from overpractising the techniques of internal strength, would it not be better for you? Things have turned out exactly as you have desired."

"We will not talk about this," said the old man. Turning to the young woman, he added: "A'Xiu, how are you? You had better persuade your grandmother about getting some help. You ... you ... eh, why are you sleeping with a man? Is he your lover, or is he your young husband?"

"No, no!" answered A'Xiu and Shi Potian in unison. "We are both unable to move."

Stumped, the old man reached out and pulled Shi Potian to his feet. Since the ropes around his body prevented him from bending his waist and limbs, Shi Potian emerged from the folds of the quilt like a very straight pillar of wood. The sight caught the old man so unaware that he jumped with fright. After taking a good look, the old man burst into laughter. "A'Xiu," he said, "the Dragon Boat Festival (Duan1 Yang2 Jie2)(2) was over a long time ago, but you have hidden such an enormous rice dumpling in the folds of your quilt."

"No," said A'Xiu at once. "He flew in from somewhere outside. I did not ... did not hide him here."

"Why then are you unable to move?" asked the old man with a laugh. "Have you turned into a big rice dumpling too?"

"If you dare to touch A'Xiu with so much as a little finger of yours," said the old woman sternly, "I will come after you with everything I have got!"

The old man sighed. "All right, I will not touch her," he said. Then, he turned to the boatman and said, "Turn the rudder around and raise the sail. Stop the boat only when I tell you to."

"Yes," answered the boatman, for he did not dare to defy the old man's orders. Then, he began to turn the rudder slowly around.

"What is going on?" asked the old woman.

"I am taking you to the Mountain of the Azure Conch (Bi4 Luo2 Shan1) so that you can recuperate well," answered the old man. "Your current incidence of overpractising is not something to be trifled with."

"I would rather die than go to the Mountain of the Azure Conch," snapped the old woman. "I have not lost to you, so why are you taking me to that dog-den of yours by force?"

Unfazed by her protests, the old man replied: "We had an agreement to participate in a martial arts contest on the Long River. If I lose, I would go to your home and bow before you, but if you lose, you would have to come to my home. It does not matter if you have overpractised, or if you are unable to defeat me. As far as I am concerned, you have no alternative but to make this trip to the Mountain of the Azure Conch. Then, the desire that I have harboured in my heart for decades would be finally met. How wonderful, how wonderful indeed!"

"I am not going!" roared the old woman in fury. "Not going! Not going! Not...." Her voice became shriller as her protests grew. Then, suddenly, due to a difficulty in catching her breath, she collapsed.

The old man smiled, as if he had accomplished a small triumph. "You have to go even if you do not want to," he said. "Do you really have any choices left?"

By then, Shi Potian could not help but interrupt the conversation with a comment of his own: "How can you force her to go when she does not want to?"

The old man became angry once more. "Do I need you to fart like a dog here?" he shrieked as he turned his palm over to give Shi Potian a slap on the face. From the looks of things, the slap would probably make the young man dizzy, put stars in his eyes and knock a few teeth out of his mouth. Then, the old man noticed the inky-black palm-print on Shi Potian's face. Retracting his palm in surprise, he soon burst into laughter: "A-ha! Big Rice Dumpling, I had initially wondered who had you bound up like this, and now I know. It was that dear grandniece of mine. The palm-print on your face appeared after she hit you, did it not?"

"Your grandniece?" asked Shi Potian, for he did not understand what the old man was talking about.

"Do you not know who I am?" asked the old man in return. "I am Ding Busi. Ding Busan is my elder brother. Although he is older than I, his martial arts skills are not as good ... As for my grandniece..."

Shi Potian could indeed see some facial resemblance between the old man and Ding Busan. The clothes they wore were similar too, except for the bright golden yellow belt that the younger Ding had around his waist. "Ah, yes," said Shi Potian at last. "Ding Ding Dang Dang is your grandniece. You are right; the palm-print appeared after Ding Ding Dang Dang hit me. She was also the one who bound

me up."

Ding Busi held his stomach and roared with laughter. "I have always said that there is no one under the sun besides the girl A'Dang who is capable of such mischief!" he remarked. "Very good, very good, very good! Why did she bind you up?"

"Her grandfather wants to kill me," answered Shi Potian. "He finds my martial arts skills too poor, and calls me a moron."

Thrilled, Ding Busan laughed until he had to bend over at the waist. He said, "When Old Fourth runs into a man whom Old Third wants to kill, he ... he..."

"He would kill him too?" asked Shi Potian in fright.

"Who is there under the sun who can guess the desires of Ding Busi's heart?" the old man asked in return. "You would think that I would have you killed too, but no, I intend to do otherwise." Standing up, he lifted Shi Potian by the scruff of the neck with his left hand. Then, he drew the edge of his right palm quickly over the ropes around Shi's body, moving the palm in a straight line from top to bottom. The thick ropes were cut immediately in a spectacular sight that was not necessarily matched by the sharpest of blades.

"Laoyezi(3), this skill of yours is very formidable," said Shi Potian appreciatively. "What is it called?"

"This skill is indeed amazing," answered Ding Busi as his anger dissipated with the young man's praise. "I am afraid that there is no one under the sun who is capable of such strength, except Ding Busi himself. The skill? Well, it is called ..."

"Hmmph, the rat has climbed on to the weighing scales," remarked the old woman with a cold and sarcastic laugh. Having regained consciousness a while ago, she could not help but interrupt when she heard Ding Busi blowing his own trumpet. "Imagine, praising your own and calling it great! This skill is called 'The Swift Sabre Cuts Through Hemp' (Kuai⁴ Dao¹ Zhan³ Luan⁴ Ma²), and all the farmhands who have learnt a few moves from a three-legged cat know how to execute it. Who would not?"

Ding Busi spat in disgust. "*Pei! Pei!* Those who have learnt a few moves from a three-legged cat know how to execute my 'Swift Sabre Cuts Through Hemp'?" he

asked. "You should just do it, and show me!"

"You know full well that I have overpractised," answered the old woman. "Now that I do not have any strength, you have come and uttered these irresponsible and sarcastic remarks. Big Rice Dumpling, let me tell you this: If you go to any town or marketplace, and come upon people who perform martial arts and sell medicinal pastes to swindle others, just give them a wen or two (1-2 pieces of copper-cash, or about 1 gramme of silver) and they will show you 'The Swift Sabre Cuts Through Hemp'. I assure you that what these people do will look exactly the same as what this old cheat here has done. Not only are there no differences between the two, the marketplace swindlers' skills may even be better than his! Since all the unscrupulous swindlers under the sun know this skill, how rare and desirable can it be?"

Ding Busi found the old woman's words so unkind and caustic that he could not help but become furious. Then, he reached out and made a grab for her shoulder.

"Do not be violent!" shouted Shi Potian. Moving his body aside, he turned his hand over and sent a cutting move against the old man's right wrist. This was 'The Hand of the White Crane' (Bai² He⁴ Shou³), one of the eighteen moves from the seizing techniques that Ding Dang had taught him. He could move freely again because his acupoints -- blocked by Ding Dang much earlier -- had been released gradually by the flow of internal strength in his body. In addition, the flow of blood to his limbs was no longer restricted after the ropes around him were cut.

Ding Busi gasped in surprise, before turning his hand over and grabbing the young man's lower arm.

Shi Potian responded by changing his moves at once, for he was already very familiar with the execution of the eighteen moves that made up the Seizing Techniques of the Ding Family. As his left palm went out, his right hand headed for his opponent's eyes.

"Good!" said Ding Busi in a loud voice. "These are Old Third's seizing techniques." He stretched his arm forward and pressed it down against the other's elbow.

Shi Potian brought his arms around in a circular move and struck the old man's temples with his fists. Ding Busi lowered his arms and moved them apart, hitting the young man's arms with a lightning-fast and bone-shaking strike. He thought that the strike would break Shi's arms at once; hence, he did not expect to feel a burst of pain and numbness throughout his own torso when the four arms met. As Shi stood steady and still in response, the plank beneath Ding's feet snapped. The boat rolled violently to the left and the right. Ding took a step backwards as quickly as he could, avoiding the broken plank as he went. Then, he uttered another gasp of surprise.

Ding Busi's first gasp was merely to register his unexpected discovery of Shi Potian's ability to use the eighteen moves in the Seizing Techniques of his Ding Family. However, his second gasp was one of true astonishment, for it had occurred after he was forced to take a step backwards subsequent to engaging Shi's arms in a duel of strength. Ding found the young man's internal strength so rich, profound and full-bodied that it seemed to flow endlessly. Although he had not used all his strength in the strike, the ability of his opponent to stand as if nothing had happened and the fact that he had broken a plank himself were sufficient to count as the loss of a stroke.

This man is so formidable, so how could he have been captured by Ding Dang? How did his face end up getting struck by her palm?

Doubts and suspicions crept into Ding Busi's mind.

The old woman was no less amazed by what she saw, but she quickly burst into laughter. "Even ... even a muddle-headed young man can ... can ... can...", she began, only to be stopped by the shortness of breath.

"Let me finish the sentence for you," said Ding Busi in an irritated voice. "'Even a muddle-headed young man can defeat you, so what heroism and bravado have you left to display?' Did I say it right? If you did not give utterance to these words, you would have probably died of constipation."

The old woman nodded in agreement as laugh-lines appeared all over her face.

Ding Busan turned to Shi Potian and asked: "Big Rice Dumpling, who is your teacher?"

The young man scratched his head. Although he had learnt martial arts skills

from Xie Yanke and Ding Dang, he had never actually acknowledged them as his teachers. Thus, he replied: "I do not have a teacher."

"Rubbish!" snapped Ding Busi. "In that case, where did you steal the eighteen moves of our seizing techniques from?"

"I did not steal any moves," answered Shi Potian. "Ding Ding Dang Dang taught them to me in ten days. She is not my teacher, but my ... my...." Although he wanted to say 'my wife', he found it rather inappropriate. So, he simply left the fact unspoken.

"Curse your grandmother!" said Ding Busi as his anger grew. "Did you say that A'Dang taught you these skills? What nonsense!"

The old woman, whose breathing had returned to some form of normality, interrupted the exchange. "Everyone in the realm of the rivers and lakes says, 'Of the two men in the Ding Family, one is a hero, while the other is a dog-bear coward'," she remarked in a cold and sarcastic voice. "These words are not erroneous, for I have seen with my own eyes today, how absolutely true these rumours are."

Ding Busi became so angry that he began shouting like a child. "When did these words come into existence?" he asked. "You must have made them up yourself! Tell me: Who is the hero, and who is the dog-bear coward? Who is there in the martial arts circle who does not know that my pugilistic skills are better than Old Third's?"

The old woman did not dare to speak hurriedly, so her reply came out in a slow succession of words: "Ding Dang is Old Ding the Third's grand-daughter. Old Ding the Third taught his son, and the son taught his daughter Ding Dang. Then, Ding Dang went on to teach this little muddle-headed fellow here. This fellow learnt martial arts for only ten days, but he is already able to defeat Old Ding the Fourth. Now, go and get all the people under the sun to consider ... consider ... consider...." The old woman was short of breath once more.

By then, Ding Busi had become very impatient with the sluggish pace of conversation, so he quickly said: "Let me say it for you: 'Now, go and get all the people under the sun to consider this matter: Who exactly is the hero, and who is the dog-bear coward? Old Ding the Third is the hero, of course, while Old Ding

the Fourth is the dog-bear coward!" " His voice become louder as he spoke, until it rang out like thunder over the river.

The old woman smiled and nodded in acknowledgement. "It ... it is good that you are aware of this," she said in a voice that was as faint as a strand of fly-away hair, yet Ding Busi's ears found these words terribly depressing.

"Who says that this Big Rice Dumpling is better than Ding Busi?" he roared resentfully. "Come, come, come; let us have another contest! If I am unable to ... to..." He wanted to say 'throw you into the river within three moves' and lay some consequences down, but as soon as the words reached the tip of his tongue, he realised that his opponent's pugilistic skills were not to be trifled with. Therefore, 'three moves' were probably insufficient to take him down.

Then, he thought about saying 'ten moves', but he quickly decided against it because he did not have the confidence to do so. 'Twenty moves', on the other hand, sounded a little too many, while 'a hundred moves' denoted a complete loss of his heroic bearing. After all, he was a man with an established name. What wonder was there if he had to use a hundred moves before the student of his grandniece could be defeated?

As he hesitated, the old woman said, "If you are unable to defeat him within a hundred thousand moves, you will formally acknowledge him ... acknowledge him ... acknowledge him ... *cough cough*!"

" 'You will formally acknowledge him as your teacher!' " shouted Ding Busi. "That was what you wanted to say, was that not?" By then, he was already on his way towards Shi Potian, having leapt up into the air as soon as the words 'acknowledge him as your teacher' were out of his mouth. With his palms moving as if they were in flight before him, he struck out towards the top of Shi's head, as well as his chest.

Although Shi Potian had learnt the eighteen moves of the Seizing Techniques of the Ding Family, he could only respond to these moves as they were executed by Ding Dang because he had learnt to use them by rote. He could not apply the techniques to different situations, so how could he take on Ding Busi and the flurry of palms that seemed to be rushing towards him in the thousands and the ten thousands?

All he could do was to stretch his palms out in a bid to protect his head. Just then, he felt an immense pressure on the Da Zhui acupoint at the base of his neck. He had been struck.

Located where the six yang channels of the hand and the foot(4) met the Extraordinary Channel of Du (Du1 Mai4), the Da Zhui acupoint was a very vital part of the human body. Yet, it was this very location that enabled the acupoint to respond to attacks with a reflexive and simultaneous burst of internal energy that came from all the channels in the body.

As a result, Ding Busi received a tremendous jolt that shook his entire body before throwing him aside. However, when the old man looked at Shi Potian, he found him acting as if nothing had happened. Although Ding Busi had managed to hit Shi Potian, the fact that the old man himself was thrown back meant that the victor and the vanquished could not be determined between them.

The old woman spoke up in a rather sinister voice: "Ding Busi, he allowed you to hit him on purpose, but you were thrown back. You are really useless! All it took was a single move and you were defeated!"

"How could I be defeated?" asked Ding Busi angrily. "What nonsense!"

"Let us say then that you have not been defeated," suggested the old woman. "Now, let him hit you on the Da Zhui acupoint. If you do not die and he is thrown back by a few steps, the duel will be considered a draw."

Ding Busi thought: This little fellow's internal strength is extremely powerful and rich. If he strikes my Da Zhui acupoint, I will suffer severe injuries and even death. Hence, he said, "Why should I want him to hit my Da Zhui acupoint for no rhyme or reason? Perhaps you should let me hit your Da Zhui acupoint instead."

"I have known a long time ago that the Dog-Bear Coward Ding does not have any guts," said the old woman. "He knows nothing except for a type of trickery that enables him to gain an advantage over others. Therefore, he does not dare to match his opponent palm-for-palm or fist-for-fist in an orderly competition that does not allow anyone to dodge or put up a defence."

Now that the old woman had given voice to the thoughts on his heart, Ding Busi felt embarrassed. Nevertheless, he said, "This reckless way of fighting is used by boorish and uncouth men who do not know any martial arts. As

established names in the field of pugilism, how can we involve ourselves in such foolish play?" Yet, he knew that his lame arguments could not withstand any rebuttals, so amidst the laughter of the old woman, he turned to Shi Potian and said, "Come, come, let us have another round of competition."

"But I have learnt only the seizing techniques that Ding Ding Dang Dang taught me," said Shi Potian. "I do not know any other martial arts skills, so I do not know how to respond if you use that wild palm-shaking skill again. Laoyezi, let us just consider you the victor. We will not compete again."

Unfortunately, the words 'consider you the victor' sounded terribly unpleasant to Ding Busi. Raising his voice, he roared: "Victory is victory, and defeat is defeat. How can there be anything to consider or unconsider? I will allow you to make the first move. Come over here and hit me."

"But I do not know how," answered Shi Potian, shaking his head.

The old woman sneered, stoking the anger in Ding Busi's heart further. "Curse your mother!" the old man shouted. "So you do not know how to hit someone. Let me teach you then! Now, pay attention: Use your palm to hit me like this, and I will deflect the blow like that. Then, I will turn my hand over and strike you like this. You will move your body to the side like that to avoid the blow, before using your left fist to hit me over here."

Shi Potian learnt the moves quickly and struck Ding Busi as he had been told. The old man responded by launching a counter-attack, but after only four moves, Shi Potian found himself unable to react when Ding Busi sent a fist towards him. Dropping both his hands, the young man said, "I do not know what to do next."

Ding Busi became angry, yet he was amused. "You are using the moves that I taught you," he said. "So how can we still compete?"

"I have already said that we do not need to compete," answered Shi Potian. "You are considered the winner!"

"No, that will not do," said Ding Busi. "If I do not gain true and honest victory over you, Xiaocui will ridicule me for the rest of our lives. When she refers to the Great Hero Ding as the Great Dog-Bear Coward Ding, where will I put my face? Now, remember: When I hit you like this, you do not need to deflect the blow.

Instead, take a step forward and stab my abdomen with your finger. This is a very insidious move that will prevent my fist from taking a direct punch at you. Instead, I would have to move my fist away. This is called 'Using an Attack as a Means of Defence' where 'Safety is Certainly Found by Attacking the Enemy'." As the old man taught, his hands demonstrated the moves.

Shi Potian made it a point to remember the moves, before fighting with Ding Busi again. He started right from the beginning and went on until he had exhausted the moves that the old man had taught. Then, he stopped. Consequently, the old man had to keep on teaching him, while he kept on learning.

Ding Busi's fist and palm techniques had a very complex series of variations, but when these were used in the fights with Shi Potian, they were limited to those that had been taught to the young man. Hence, Ding Busi thought: If we continue in this manner, when will I gain victory over him? I can only hope for a stroke of luck, where this muddle-headed fellow forgets the moves. As soon as he makes the slightest mistake, he will be struck down ruthlessly.

Yet, Shi Potian had a remarkable memory for martial arts, for he could remember the moves after Ding Busi demonstrated them only once. Thus, there were no flaws in his moves even after he had exchanged dozens of them with the old man. On his part, Ding Busi did not dare to teach Shi Potian any common moves, especially when the old woman kept sneering at him.

As soon as she saw any move that was insufficiently swift, ferocious or exquisite in attack and defence, the old woman would say a few words in derision. Although she could hardly move after overpractising her techniques of internal strength, her eyes remained very keen and sharp. She made it a point to ridicule even the most brilliant of Ding Busi's moves, what more those that were less unique.

Ding Busi stirred himself to the point of doing his best in teaching Shi Potian his fist and palm techniques. Hence, his efforts did not pale at all in comparison to what he had put into his many real and life-endangering duels with the old woman years ago.

After many more moves, the sky began to brighten. Feeling a little anxious,

Ding Busi decided to change the movements of his fist without warning. He executed 'The Thirsty Horse Gallops to the Spring' (Ke3 Ma3 Ben1 Quan2) and pounced forward, fist and all.

"The sequence is incorrect!" said Shi Potian loudly.

"What sequence is there?" asked Ding Busi. "Anything goes, so long as I have already imparted it to you."

On his part, Shi Potian did not forget that he had used 'The Powdery Butterfly Somersaults in Flight' (Fen3 Die2 Fan1 Fei1) to deal with that particular move by Ding Busi before, so he resorted to the same response and leapt clear away.

Ding Busi thought: I have only to force you into the river; then, I will be considered the winner. Anything that Xiaocui says after that will be pointless. Taking a step forward, he executed a move called 'A Crosswise Sweep Against a Thousand-Man Army' (Heng2 Sao3 Qian1 Jun1) and sent both his arms violently into his opponent's path.

Shi Potian responded according to the sequence of moves that he had learnt earlier, using 'A Gentle Breeze and a Sprinkling of Rain' (He2 Feng1 Xi4 Yu3) to avoid the wild oncoming force. However, when he took a step backwards, his left foot landed on the edge of the boat.

"Off you go!" shouted Ding Busi in delight. Executing 'The Bell and the Drum Sound Together' (Zhong1 Gu3 Qi2 Ming2), he made a circular movement with both his palms and attacked the young man's temples from the left and the right.

If Shi Potian had handled the attack according to the Ding Busi's instructions, he should have taken another step backwards and used 'An Unexpected Display of Spring Clouds' (Chun1 Yun2 Zha4 Zhan3) to deflect the oncoming palms. However, there was now no room for retreat behind him. If he took another step backwards, he would fall right into the river. Thus pressed, Shi could hardly give the matter further thought. Since he was most familiar with the two moves that Ding Dang had taught him, he plunged right into them without bothering about their appropriateness at all.

Dodging the attack, Shi Potian passed through the flurry of palms before him and went behind Ding Busi. Executing the 'Hand of the Tiger's Claw' with his right

hand and the 'Jade Maiden Picks a Needle Up' with his left, he reached simultaneously for the old man's Ling Tai and Xuan Shu acupoints. As soon as he had a good grip on each acupoint, a sudden and powerful burst of internal strength went forth.

Ding Busi shouted loudly, and sat down on the wooden floorboards of the cabin.

Yet, in truth, how could Shi Potian hold a highly skilled pugilist like Ding Busan down with the seizing techniques that he had learnt for only a few days, even if he (Shi) had twice the level of internal strength?

Shi Potian had succeeded simply because of Ding Busi's preconceptions. Having taught Shi the fist and palm techniques in the first place, the old man firmly believed that he (Shi) would use 'An Unexpected Display of Spring Clouds' against his execution of 'The Bell and the Drum Sound Together'. The use of 'An Unexpected Display of Spring Clouds' would then necessitate the taking of a step backwards, hence forcing the young man into the river.

Now if Ding had been fighting with another highly skilled pugilist, he would have naturally known that his opponent could use all sorts of moves against 'The Bell and the Drum Sound Together'. After dealing with that, the opponent would also follow through with many other formidable moves. Therefore, Ding would have guarded himself against attacks from all directions. He would not have allowed his opponent to dash behind him and make a grab for his vital acupoints.

But Ding Busi had already exchanged more than a hundred moves with Shi Potian, and the latter had done exactly as he had been told. All the moves that Shi used were executed according to the methods that Ding had instructed him in. Hence, the old man did not feel the need to take any precautions against his younger opponent at all. Neither did it cross his mind that the little muddle-headed fellow would suddenly change his tack and use those moves with incomparable skill and wind-like speed. Ding tried to fend the attack off, but it was already too late. He had already fallen victim to Shi.

To make things worse, Shi Potian's internal strength was so formidable that Ding Busi's high level of cultivation in internal energy was insufficient to withstand the former's attack on his vital acupoints.

This unexpected turn of events caught both Ding Busi and Shi Potian greatly by surprise. The old woman was astonished too, yet she managed to erupt into gleeful laughter. Unfortunately, after going "Ha-ha, ha-ha!", she fainted. Her eyes rolled back until the whites could be seen.

"Elderly Madame, how ... how are you?" asked Shi Potian, shocked by the frightening expression on the old woman's face.

Almost immediately, A'Xiu's voice was heard: "Elder Brother, what has happened to my grandmother?" Unable to see the happenings on the bow from inside the cabin, the young woman had spoken up as soon as she heard the panic in Shi Potian's voice.

"A-yo, she ... has fainted," answered the young man. "She does not look right this time, so I am afraid ... afraid that she might find it difficult to regain consciousness."

"Are you saying that my grandmother is already ... already dead?" asked A'Xiu, shocked.

Shi Potian stretched a hand out to the old woman's nostrils. "Well, she is still breathing," he answered, "but something looks ... er, very wrong."

"What exactly is wrong?" asked A'Xiu anxiously.

"She looks as if she is dead," replied Shi Potian. "Let me hold you up, so that you can take a look."

A'Xiu was reluctant to have the young man touch or carry her in any way, but because of her real concern for her grandmother, she hesitated only for a moment before saying, "All right! Then, I would have to trouble you for it, Elder Brother."

All his life, Shi Potian had never heard anyone speak in such a refined and polite manner. The people at the Clan of Eternal Happiness had spoken to him with all the respect they could muster, but the men were actually more cautious than friendly. Even the girl Shi Jian had not been able to hide the fear on her face. As for Ding Dang, she had been very affectionate, yet she was also terribly rude. Consequently, Shi Potian found the speech of the young woman before him truly soothing and pleasant to his ears.

Without further ado, he brought her up to a sitting position, wrapped a thin blanket around her body and carried her out to the bow of the boat.

As soon as A'Xiu saw the condition of her grandmother, she gasped. "Elder Brother, could you please use your palm to send some internal strength through the Ling Tai acupoint of my grandmother?" she asked. "I know that this is a presumptuous request, so I am really embarrassed about it."

When Shi Potian heard the gentle and amiable way in which A'Xiu spoke, he glanced at her with lowered eyes. In the light of the sun that was just rising then, he saw a pair of big, bright and clear eyes looking back at him. Those eyes were set in a fair melonseed-shaped face that had a certain cultured elegance about it. Almost at once, A'Xiu's face turned totally red in embarrassment. Unable to turn her head away in avoidance, she closed her eyes.

"Guniang, you are actually so good-looking," blurted Shi Potian.

A'Xiu turned even redder. Due to the short distance between them, she closed her small mouth tightly to avoid speaking and blowing her breath on to Shi Potian's face.

"I am sorry!" said the young man after a moment. Putting A'Xiu down quickly, he turned to the old woman and placed his palm on her Ling Tai acupoint. He did not know how to send his internal strength into someone else's body, so he simply used the method that Ding Dang had taught him and exercised a burst of energy through the Ling Tai acupoint with the 'Hand of the Tiger's Claw'.

The old woman gasped as she regained consciousness. "Muddle-headed fellow, what are you doing?" she snapped.

"The young lady asked me to send some internal strength into your body," said Shi Potian. "Sure enough, you are now awake."

"You have blocked my acupoint!" said the old woman angrily. "Is that the way you send internal energy into someone else's body?"

"I am sorry, I am sorry," said Shi Potian, feeling quite embarrassed. "I really do not know how to do it, so please do teach me." The burst of internal strength that he had sent into the old woman's body a moment ago had shaken her internal organs so badly that these organs had felt as if they had all been turned

upside-down. Her Ling Tai acupoint had become blocked as well. Fortunately, the old woman's acupoints had been blocked much earlier from overpractising, so the additional blockage did not affect her much.

Initially, the old woman was furious, yet she knew that Shi Potian had an incomparably rich level of internal strength. She thought: This silly little fellow's ability seems quite unnatural, so it could have appeared after he accidentally ingested the Lucid Ganoderma fungus (ling2 zhi4) or some other equally wonderful herb, or even the gall-bladder of a strange but intelligent beast. That is why he does not know how to use the powerful energy within him. Now that I am incapacitated from overpractising, perhaps I could rely on his internal strength to release all the channels that have been blocked.

Thus, she said, "All right, I will teach you. Now, concentrate your energy in your abdomen. Do you feel a gentle rolling heat there? Picture that heat moving upwards through the Hand Shaoyang Channel of the Three Visceral Cavities(5)."

Xie Yanke had taught Shi Potian the names of these channels and acupoints on the Skyscraping Cliff years ago, so the young man followed the old woman's instructions and brought the energy to his palm without any difficulty. His Arhats' Divine Demon-Subduing Skill was the most exquisite internal strength technique of the Shaolin School. It utilised a combination of yin, yang, power and grace in its execution, but Shi Potian had never known how to use it until that day. It was as if he was a man with a store of treasure at home. Despite having a pile of gold and silver that was as tall as a mountain, he did not have the key to open that store. Now, with the old woman's guidance, the energy in Shi Potian's body began gushing out with a force that could rearrange the mountains and empty the seas.

"Slow down, slow...," said the old woman, but before she could finish, she gagged and threw up a huge mouthful of darkened blood.

"A-yo!" shouted Shi Potian in a fright. "What has happened? Did I do wrong?"

"Elder Brother," said A'Xiu, "my grandmother would like you to send the energy slowly into her body. Please do not be too impatient about it."

As soon as the old woman could speak, she growled: "Stupid melonhead, are you thinking of taking my life? Send a little of the energy over first, and let me

take a few breaths. Then, send over a little more."

"Yes, yes!" said Shi Potian. "I am sorry, I am really very sorry(6)!" He got ready to continue as he was told.

Suddenly, Ding Busi leapt up and said: "Curse his grandmother! Let us have another competition. What happened just now cannot be taken into consideration."

"Shameless as always!" remarked the old woman. "Why should the earlier contest not be taken into consideration? It was obvious that you had lost. If he had added a slash of a sabre or a sword to your body just now, or struck you on the top of your head with his palm(7), would you still be alive?"

Ding Busi knew that he did not have much on which to push his case, so he stopped arguing with the old woman. Instead, he turned to Shi Potian and sent a palm towards him. "I have taught you the method of handling this move," he said loudly. "So I cannot be deemed unreasonable, can I?"

Shi Potian responded quickly with one of the moves that Ding Busi had taught him, knocking the oncoming palm away with a sweep of his hand.

Ding Busi sent another palm towards the young man. "I have taught you this as well," he roared, "so you cannot call me a shameless bully who humiliates my junior, can you?"

Sure enough, each subsequent move that the old man used came from the set that he had imparted to his opponent earlier. Therefore, he was obviously trying to show himself as a man who was true to his word and noble in character. The pace of the exchange quickened, and after more than ten moves, the old man no longer had sufficient time to speak. Instead, all he could manage was brief shouts of "Taught you this, taught you that, taught you, taught you! Taught ... taught ... taught...."

Despite Shi Potian's natural talent for martial arts, there was really no way that he could remember and apply all the different variations of the palm techniques that he had practised only once before, during a fight that proceeded at such a high speed. Hence, as soon as Ding Busi quickened the pace of his fist attacks and leg movements, Shi Potian found himself lost when it came to responding. From the looks of things, Shi would succumb to Ding's palms within the next few

moves.

Suddenly, the old woman spoke up: "Hold on, I have something to say."

"Xiaocui, what do you want to say?" asked Ding Busi, his hands coming to a stop in their attacks.

The old woman turned to Shi Potian. "Young man," she said, "my body does not feel well. Send some internal strength over to me again."

"That is very good," Ding Busi remarked with a nod of his head. "Since you are unwilling to accept my assistance after the channels in your body became blocked from overpractising, it is good that you have asked him for help. His internal strength is actually quite powerful despite his poor skills in external martial arts."

The old woman snorted in disgust. "Yes," she replied in a cold voice. "You taught him his external skills, but not the internal one. Therefore, while his external skills are poor, his internal strength is rather powerful."

Ding Busi became angry. "How can you say that his external skills were taught by me?" he asked. "I have only taught him for half a day. But if he spends three to five years under my instruction, hmmph, no one among the younger generation would be his match!"

"What purpose is there if his accomplishments are exactly the same as yours?" asked the old woman. "He can already able to defeat you without learning your martial arts skills. On the other hand, I am afraid that he may not even be able defeat you if he knows your techniques. Now if his abilities become weaker the more he learns, would you say that it is good to learn from you, or otherwise?"

Stumped, Ding Busi hesitated for a moment before making his reply: "Look at his 'Hand of the Tiger's Claw' and the 'Jade Maiden Picks a Needle Up'. Are these not the techniques of my Ding Family?"

"They were taught by Ding Busan's grand-daughter, not you," answered the old woman. Then, she turned to Shi Potian and said, "Young man, come over here. Do not pay him any attention."

"Yes," answered Shi. Sitting down beside her, he placed a palm on her Ling Tai acupoint and began using his internal strength to unblock the channels in her

body. This time, he sent the internal strength over in a very very slow manner, for he was afraid of causing her to throw up blood again.

By and by, the old woman raised her arm slowly and covered her face with her sleeve. She did not want Ding Busi to see her speaking, or hear what she was about to say. "When he fights with you again," she whispered to Shi Potian, "your palms must carry some internal strength in response. Simply bring the strength to your palms just like what you are doing now. When he sends his palms towards you, you should respond with the exact same move, meet his palms with yours and send your internal strength into his body. This old fellow wants to force you into the river so that you will drown. Therefore, you must remember this: Use whatever move that he is using against you. This is the only way that will ... will preserve the lives of the three of us."

Although the old woman had only known Shi Potian for a few shichen (1 shichen = 2 hours), she could already tell that he had a kind heart. If she had wanted him to make things difficult for Ding Busi on her behalf, he would have been likely to give the old man some concessions, instead of complying fully with her instructions. Thus, by saying 'the only way that will preserve the lives of the three of us', the old woman hoped to incite him to do his best because of the other two lives that were involved.

Shi Potian nodded.

Then, the old woman said, "You do not need to send me any more internal strength for the moment. When your palms and those of that old fellow meet again, you must not be slow in sending your strength out. Do it swiftly and with power; the more forceful it is, the better it will be."

"Will he throw up blood?" asked Shi Potian.

"No, he will not," answered the old woman. "I overpractised and lost all my internal strength. Hence, I threw up blood because I was unable to withstand the sudden force of your strength. That old fellow has a very rich level of internal strength; that is why he did not throw up any blood when you grabbed the acupoint on his back earlier. Is that not true? If you do not use all your strength, you will end up being jolted until you throw up blood yourself. If you are wounded, there will be no one else to protect my grand-daughter and me. The

non-ambulant old woman and the immobile young girl will be trampled upon and humiliated by all and sundry."

Righteous indignation surged into Shi Potian's heart as soon as he heard these words. He felt that he could die immediately on behalf of the old woman and the young girl without a single frown on his brow. Yet, he knew nothing about the two women; he had no idea if they were good or evil.

The old woman moved her sleeve slowly away from her face. "Thank you very much," she said. "Since Ding Busi has not admitted defeat, you should go and exchange some moves with him. Sigh, having lived to such an old age, I have seen quite a number of true men and great heroes. Yet, I have never expected to have an old dog-bear coward before me just before I die. What a terrible injustice!"

"An old dog-bear coward?" asked Ding Busi angrily. "Both of them are not old, and you are certainly not talking about yourself. So are you cursing me?"

"A man who has three-tenths of knowledge about himself can perhaps still be considered as not entirely ruined," answered the old woman with a smile. "Ding the Fourth, would it not be easy to have him killed? Just go ahead and use some moves that you have not taught him, and I assure you, he will not be able to handle them at all."

"How can Ding the Fourth be so shameless?" roared the old man in anger. "Look carefully, and you will see that I have taught him every move I used."

Satisfied that she had achieved her goal of getting Ding Busi to make that very statement, the old woman sighed and fell silent.

Meanwhile, Ding Busi let out a snort of disgust and said in a loud voice: "Big Rice Dumpling, I am about to execute 'Sailing a Boat Against the Currents' (Ni⁴ Shui³ Xing² Zhou¹). I have taught you this move, so you had better not forget its response." Bending his knees slightly to lower his body, the old man sent his left palm into a vertical upwards sweep.

Alerted by the words 'Sailing a Boat Against the Currents', Shi Potian bent his knees slightly and sent his left palm into a vertical upwards sweep as well.

"That is wrong!" shouted Ding Busi. "That is not how you deal with this move!"

Then, before he could finish speaking, he suddenly realised that Shi Potian's right palm was about to touch his own left hand. As his heart went cold, he thought: This young fellow's internal strength is very powerful, so much so that I am afraid that it is above mine. If I enter into a duel of internal strength with him, things will not be any fun. Hence, the old man withdrew his left palm at once and sent his right one out in a forward push. This move was known as 'An Amazing Peak Appears Unexpectedly' (Qi2 Feng2 Tu1 Qi3).

Remembering the old woman's words, Shi Potian executed 'An Amazing Peak Appears Unexpectedly' as well, this time with three-tenths of his internal strength in his palm.

Ding Busi was taken aback, for the oncoming force from his opponent's palm was so strong that the resulting movement in the air could be felt even before the palm itself reached its target. Hence, he quickly resorted to another move.

Shi Potian paid close attention to the old man and imitated everything he did. Since he did not have to recall the responses that were needed to deal with the old man's moves, he could concentrate on exercising and accumulating his internal strength where it was needed. Consequently, his palms began to create a breeze as they moved through the air. The power that accompanied his strikes became increasingly stronger as well.

Soon, Ding Busi became so wary of his opponent that he had to move cautiously lest their palms met. He was afraid of being drawn into a duel of internal strength that pitted a relentless force against the other, should the hands of both parties become stuck together. There were several occasions during which he noticed some flaws in Shi Potian's moves, but he ended up withdrawing his hands and changing his own moves as soon as the younger man imitated him.

Since his name was established in the realm of the rivers and lakes, Ding Busi had fought with numerous renowned pugilists and highly-skilled masters of martial arts. However, he had never had an opponent like Shi Potian, who copied each move he made, regardless of what it was. If the opponent had been another reputable man, such a manner of fighting would naturally come close to being called 'shameless'. Hence, he could have had the fight stopped there and then. Unfortunately, Shi Potian happened to be the exact opposite of Ding's

previous opponents. Despite the immense reservoir of internal strength in Shi's body, he did not know any external martial arts skills at all. Therefore, the two men had had an agreement in which the fight would proceed only with the moves that the old man had taught the younger one. By imitating Ding's moves to the 'T', Shi's actions were perfectly justifiable in the face of their agreement.

Ding Busi started to curse and swear in a fit of impatience, yet there was nothing he could do to Shi Potian.

After fifty or sixty moves, Shi began to grasp the methods of exercising and utilising his internal strength. Consequently, each successive fist or palm that he sent out was more powerful than the one before it. Soon, the *hu-hu* sound of moving air could be heard on the bow of the boat, as if a strong wind had begun to blow.

By then, Ding Busi did not dare to show the slightest bit of indolence or neglect. As he faced Shi Potian with all he had, he wondered: What sort of anomaly is this young fellow supposed to be? Could his stupidity be a deliberate act of hiding his evil intentions, when he is -- in reality -- a master pugilist with extremely high accomplishments in martial arts?

As the fight wore on, Ding Busi began to find it increasingly difficult to avoid his opponent's palms. Fortunately for him, Shi Potian remained focused on copying his moves, so the old man did not have to worry about any unexpected attacks. After a few more moves, Ding made several arcs with both his palms and struck diagonally out. Known as 'Meeting an Endless Stream on the Left and the Right' (Zuo3 You4 Feng2 Yuan2)(8), the move relied on the situation at that specific moment in the fight to determine whether the palms were launched towards the left or the right.

Stinking little fellow, you cannot imitate me now, can you? thought Ding Busi in delight. How would you know the direction from which my palms will attack?

Sure enough, Shi Potian found the old man's move so difficult to follow that he asked: "Are you attacking to the left or the right?"

"Make a guess!" answered Ding Busi, laughing gleefully as his palms continued to move.

Both alarmed and frightened, Shi Potian had no alternative but to raise both

his palms and push them towards Ding Busi's hands. He did not know the direction from which his opponent's palms would come, so he sent his internal strength to the left and the right at the same time.

The sight of the oncoming palms gave Ding Busi a terrible shock, for he felt that the silly young man before him had copied his skilful combination of false and concrete motions in an incomparably clumsy way. With 'Meeting an Endless Stream on the Left and the Right' becoming 'Both Left and Right' (Yi4 Zuo3 Yi4 You4), the simultaneous use of both palms had totally eliminated the exquisiteness of the original move. In addition, Shi Potian's actions had also violated the essentials of pugilistic studies(9). Consequently, the old man found himself drawn irrevocably into a duel of internal strength with his young opponent.

As a burst of crisis-induced perspiration appeared on his forehead, Ding Busi had a flash of inspiration. Raising both his hands, he sent the force of his palms into the sky. Known as 'The Heavenly King Holds the Pagoda Up' (Tian1 Wang2 Tuo1 Ta3), this move was originally meant for dealing with opponents who leaped up and attacked while still in mid-air. It should not have been used in the first place, because Shi Potian was not airborne.

But the young man had been imitating every move that his older opponent made. So when Shi saw Ding executing 'The Heavenly King Holds the Pagoda Up', he raised his palms and struck upwards with a *hu* sound without understanding the reason for it.

Then, as they continued to hold their palms up towards the sky, the two men looked at each other.

Unable to contain himself any longer, Ding Busi burst into loud laughter. When Shi Potian saw the animosity of his opponent fading away, he began to laugh aloud as well. A'Xiu, who could see the goings-on as she leaned against a wooden pillar in the cabin, broke into a beautiful smile.

However, the old woman had other thoughts. "Shameless, shameless!" she said. "You are unable to defeat the child, so you have resorted to this devilish trick just to deceive him!"

Yet, Ding Busi was not bothered by the old woman's accusations. Instead, he

felt very pleased with his own quick-wittedness, for he had been able to come up with such a strange way of avoiding a duel of internal strength with Shi Potian, as well as the impending danger, in a mere flash of time. Laughing in delight, he said: "I do not have any grievances or resentments against this young fellow, so why should I take his life with a burst of internal strength?"

Before the old woman could respond with more sarcastic remarks, the boat shook several times and surged downstream. As it turned out, the boat had entered a narrower part of the river where the currents were very swift.

"Xiaocui, we have arrived at the Isle of the Azure Conch!" announced Ding Busi with a gleeful laugh. "You and your grand-daughter, as well as Big Rice Dumpling, are all invited to go ashore and stay!"

The old woman's countenance changed at once. "No, I am not going!" she said in a trembling voice. "I would rather die than to set a single foot on your ghastly island!"

"What is wrong with going ashore and staying for a few days?" asked Ding Busi. "You are my highly esteemed guest. You will be able to recuperate well in my home, for it is a very comfortable place with good food and drinks, as well as a comprehensive range of renowned and valuable medicinal products(10)."

"Comfortable my fart!" snapped the old woman angrily, using an expletive as she became more panicky about the situation that she was in.

As the surging waves of the swift-flowing river struck the boat, Shi Potian followed the gaze of Ding Busi towards the right. There, he saw a peak rising from the water, a lush expanse of greenery that was pointed at the top and rounded at the base. Since the peak looked just like a spiral shell, Shi guessed that it was the Isle of the Azure Conch.

"Pull in over there," said Ding Busi to the boatman.

"Yes!" the boatman replied.

Then, Ding Busi bent down, lifted the anchor and stood on the bow. He would toss the anchor on to the island as soon as the boat went near enough.

Shi Potian spoke: "Laoyezi, since this old lady is unwilling to go to your home, why are you ..." But before he could finish, the old woman leapt up, grabbed

A'Xiu by the arm and dived into the river.

"No!" shouted Ding Busi. He turned and made a backhanded grab for the women, but how could he have reached them on time?

A *plonk* was heard. A splash of water followed and the two women disappeared beneath the waves.

Greatly startled, Shi Potian grabbed a plank from the deck and leapt into the river as well. As he did, he pushed off against the side of the boat with both his feet, and flew straight out over the water. Consequently, he managed to enter the river just beside the two women, although he had leapt a moment after the old woman did.

Shi Potian did not know how to swim, so he began swallowing water as soon as the waves struck him. Bent on rescuing the women, he held on to the plank with his right hand and started grabbing randomly in the water with his left. He caught the old woman's hair in his hand almost at once, and refused to loosen his grip. By then, the current of the river had swept the trio downstream.

It did not take long before Shi Potian's head felt dizzy and his vision became blurred, yet he was still swallowing water from the river. Suddenly, his body shook and a burst of pain was felt on his waist. He had knocked hard into a rock.

Greatly delighted, Shi Potian stretched out his legs, stood firmly on the rock and quickly pulled the old woman towards him. Fortunately, the old woman's arms were still wrapped tightly around her grand-daughter. However, Shi found it difficult to tell if the two women were alive or dead. Nevertheless, he picked both of them up at the same time and stumbled shakily ashore.

Shi Potian reached dry land after walking for only ten zhang (33.33 metres). Suddenly, he heard the old woman snapping at him: "Rude fellow! How dare you grab me by the hair!"

Startled, Shi Potian quickly replied: "Yes, yes! I am really sorry."

"How dare you ..." the old woman continued, only to utter a *wa* and throw up the water that she had swallowed earlier.

A'Xiu spoke up: "Grandmother, if it were not for this Elder Brother here and his act of rescue, we who are unable to swim would have been ... been ..." At this

point, she began throwing up water as well.

"In that case," said the old woman, "this young fellow here has indeed done us a favour by saving our lives. All right, I will not hold the rude act of grabbing me by the hair against him."

A'Xiu smiled. "That was something that could not be avoided during the rescue," she said. Then, turning to Shi Potian, she added, "Elder Brother, we would like to really ... really thank you for this." At this point, she was still in Shi's arms, with only a chi (33.33 cm) between her eyes and his. She averted her gaze to avoid meeting his eyes when she spoke, but when she and her grandmother threw up, they could not avoid doing it all over Shi's body.

Fortunately, Shi Potian was already wet from the earlier ordeal, so it did not matter if he had more water splashed on him. However, A'Xiu's face turned very red, for she felt very embarrassed about it.

"All right," said the old woman. "You can put us down now. This is the Isle of the Purple Smoke, a place that is not far from the residence of that old monster. We have to prevent him from coming over to nag."

"Yes, yes!" answered Shi Potian.

As he was about to put the two women down, someone spoke up suddenly from behind some trees: "The young fellow is probably still alive. We must find him."

Shocked, Shi Potian whispered: "Ding Busi has caught up with us." Then, he picked the two women up and ducked into a clump of trees. He did not dare to move after that.

By and by, footsteps were heard on the withered grass, and two people walked by. One of them was an elderly man, and the other was but a young girl. Shi Potian was hit by a wave a fear far greater than the sight of Ding Busi, for he could see from their backs that the duo were none other than Ding Dang and Ding Busan.

"Oh no, it is ...," he said in a trembling voice, "... it is Third Grandfather Ding."

"Why are you feeling such fear?" asked the old woman in surprise. "Did Ding Busan's grand-daughter not teach you martial arts?"

"Grandfather wants to kill me," answered Shi Potian. "Ding Ding Dang Dang blames me for being disobedient, so she eventually had me bound up like a big rice dumpling and tossed into the river. Fortunately, your boat happened to be passing by, or ... or ..."

"Or you would have become a snack for the old tortoises and soft-shelled turtles in the river," said the old woman with a laugh.

"Yes, yes!" said Shi Potian. Recalling how Ding Dang had him all coiled up in rope the day before, he found such lingering fear in his heart that he said, "Grandmother(11), they are still looking for me. If they catch me this time, I ... I would be in a terrible mess!"

The old woman became indignant. "If I am not suffering from the effects of overpractising, who is a mere Ding Busan to me! Go and call him over, and we will see if he dares to touch a single hair on you."

"Grandmother, your internal strength has not returned yet," said A'Xiu. "Let us avoid the Ding Brothers for the moment. When you are well again, it will not be too late to give them some bad times."

"Your grandmother has indeed been served a full dose of trouble this time," said the old woman angrily. "Regardless of the reasons that have been put forth, it is still the fault of that ghastly little beast and that old tyrant who would not die!"

"Grandmother," said A'Xiu gently, "why do you bring up the affairs of the past? Both of us have overpractised at the same time, so we need to recuperate with calm hearts and quiet minds. Then, we will recover quickly. If you are unhappy, you will only bring harm to your body."

"If my body is harmed, so be it," snapped the old woman. "What is there to fear? After swallowing so much water today, there is nothing left of the heroic life-long reputation of Shi Xiaocui." Her voice grew louder as she spoke.

Concerned that Ding Busan might hear them, Shi Potian said, "Grandmother, please calm down. I ... I will send some internal strength into your body." Then, without waiting for her response, he placed a palm on her Ling Tai acupoint and sent a gentle stream of energy over.

As the energy entered her body, the old woman, Grandmother Shi, had no alternative but to concentrate her internal circulation and send Shi Potian's energy towards the various acupoints that had shut themselves up. As the acupoints began opening up one after another, the old woman could not continue speaking any longer.

All Shi Potian sought was her not alerting Ding Busan to his presence, so he continued to send out an endless stream of internal energy through his palm.

Grandmother Shi was secretly amazed: This young fellow's internal strength is so exquisite and powerful, yet why does he not know any martial arts? Unfortunately, such a thought going through her mind was sufficient to cause a wave of nausea in her chest, so much so that she did not dare to ponder further on the matter until her Foot Shaoyang Channel (of the Gall Bladder) was completely unblocked. Then, she heaved a long sigh of relief, got to her feet, smiled and said, "It has been hard on you."

Shi Potian and A'Xiu were pleasantly surprised. "You can move?" they asked in unison.

"One of the foot channels is now totally open," answered Grandmother Shi, "but there are many more channels that are still blocked!"

"I am not tired," said Shi Potian. "Let us unblock all the other channels as well."

"The young fellow is uttering nonsense," said Grandmother Shi with a frown on her brow. "Both A'Xiu and I overpractised while working on the Divine Skill of the Unexpected (Wu Wang Shen Gong / Wu² Wang⁴ Shen² Gong¹). How then could our immobility be equated to an ordinary case of paralysis? We should be thanking the Heaven and the Earth for our success in unblocking a full channel today, for even if the Venerable Dharma and the True Man Zhang Sanfeng came back to life, they might not necessarily be able to unblock all the channels in my body in a single day."

"Yes, yes!" answered Shi Potian, feeling somewhat embarrassed. "I did not understand the principles behind all these occurrences, so please give me some pointers(12)."

"Well, since there is nothing to do right now," Grandmother Shi went on, "you should just help A'Xiu to unblock her Foot Shaoyang Channel as well."

"Yes, yes!" said Shi Potian. He raised A'Xiu up and positioned her left shoulder against the trunk of a tree. Then, he placed a palm on her Ling Tai acupoint and sent a stream of energy into her body, just as the old woman had taught him. A'Xiu's internal strength was a lot weaker than her grandmother's, so Shi Potian took four times longer to unblock her Foot Shaoyang Channel.

Once it was done, A'Xiu struggled to her feet. "Thank you very much," she said in a soft and gentle voice. Then, she added, "Grandmother, we do not know the esteemed surname and name of this elder brother here, so it is quite a breach of etiquette on our part because we do not know how to address him." Although A'Xiu spoke these words to her grandmother, she was actually asking Shi Potian for his name. However, she was too shy to speak directly to the young man herself.

"Hey, Big Rice Dumpling," said Grandmother Shi, "my grand-daughter asks you for your name."

"I ... I really do not know," Shi Potian began. "My mother calls me ... calls me ... " He wanted to say 'Gouzazhong', but he knew by then that the word was too crude to be uttered in front of such a cultured and dignified young girl. So he said, "They mistook me for another man, but I am really not that man. Who exactly am I? I ... I really cannot say..."

Grandmother Shi became so impatient listening to Shi Potian that she snapped: "Do not tell us your name if you are unwilling to do so. Yet, you have to come up with such a long-winded tale."

"Grandmother," said A'Xiu, "there must be one painful reason or another behind his unwillingness to tell us his name, so let us not ask him further. There is hardly any difference between addressing him by his name and not, so long as we remember his kindness in our hearts."

Shi Potian spoke up: "No, no! I am not unwilling to tell you my name, but the name is really very unpleasant to the ear."

"What is this about something that is pleasant or unpleasant to the ear?" asked Grandmother Shi. "Is there a name that is more unpleasant than Big Rice Dumpling? If you do not speak up, I will just go ahead and call you that -- 'Big Rice Dumpling'."

Big Rice Dumpling does sound a lot better than Gouzazhong, thought Shi Potian. Therefore, he smiled and said, "It is good to call me Big Rice Dumpling, for there is nothing unpleasant about it."

By then, A'Xiu had noticed how easy-going Shi Potian was, for he did not show the slightest bit of anger despite the lack of courtesy in her grandmother's words. Hence, feeling more apologetic than before, she said, "Grandmother, please do not poke further fun. As for this Elder Brother here, please do not feel offended."

"That was nothing," said Shi Potian with a laugh. "Thank the Heaven and the Earth, for I hope that Grandfather Ding Busan and Ding Ding Dang Dang will not be able to find me. Please rest here for a moment while I go and see if there is anything here to eat."

"There are many persimmon trees on this Isle of the Purple Smoke," said Grandmother Shi. "The fruit have just ripened, so you can go and pick some. The fish and crabs on the island are fat too, so there is no harm in catching some of those as well."

Acknowledging the instructions, Shi Potian dodged behind some trees and began walking stealthily away, for he was afraid of being seen by the Dings. After several tens of zhang (1 zhang = 3.33 metres), he came upon a hillside with more than ten persimmon trees. Each tree was dotted with the red of fully ripe fruit. Shi walked up to the base of a tree and shook its trunk. Almost at once, the ripe persimmons began falling all around him. After stuffing the fruit into his shirt, Shi ran back to the clump of trees where Grandmother Shi and A'Xiu were hidden to share his pickings with them.

The two women could already walk, but the channels on their upper limbs remained blocked. While Grandmother Shi could force herself to raise a hand, A'Xiu's arms were still stiff and quite paralysed. Consequently, Shi Potian had to peel the persimmons before feeding Grandmother Shi and A'Xiu one after the other. When A'Xiu saw Shi sending pieces of peeled persimmon towards her mouth, she turned so red with embarrassment that she looked like a persimmon herself. Yet, she had to eat from his hand, because she could not decline the fruit at all.

When Shi Potian tried to feed her with another piece, A'Xiu said, "Elder Brother, you should eat your fill first, before ... before ..."

Grandmother Shi cut in: "If we walk towards the south-west for a li (500 metres) or so, we will come upon a cave. But we have to wait until dark before going over to the cave for shelter. Then, the ghastly pair of brothers who are neither three nor four will not be able to find us."

"Wonderful!" said Shi Potian in delight. He did not really dread Ding Busi, but he was truly afraid of Ding Busan and his grand-daughter because they were bent on taking his life. Therefore, he was so relieved when Grandmother Shi mentioned a place in which they could hide that he ate a few more persimmons(13).

Shi Potian waited quite anxiously until darkness fell. Then, supporting Grandmother Shi on his right arm and A'Xiu on his left(14), he made his way towards the south-west.

As it turned out, the Isle of the Purple Smoke was once the playground of Grandmother Shi. Therefore, she was very familiar with the topography of the island. Consequently, she and her companions came upon an outcrop of cliffs on their right, after walking for a little more than a li (500 metres)(15). Then, Grandmother Shi instructed them to take two bends and walk through a row of short trees before they saw the mouth of a cave.

"Big Rice Dumpling," said Grandmother Shi, "you will sleep outside tonight, and serve as our guard. Do not enter the cave."

"Yes, yes!" answered Shi Potian. Then, he added: "It is a pity that we do not dare to light a fire and dry our wet clothes."

"Well, this is what you call 'the tiger has fallen upon the open plains and found itself bullied by the dogs'," said Grandmother Shi coldly. "One day, I will ensure that this ghastly pair of brothers who are neither three nor four will suffer ten times more in retribution."

Post your feedback and comments here!

Definitions, explanations and/or words left (mostly) in their original form:

Those covered in earlier chapters are not repeated.

Paternal Grandmother (nai3 nai 奶奶) = the mother of the speaker's father; will be shortened henceforth to "Grandmother" unless where the full term of address is necessary.

The Dragon Boat Festival (Duan1 Yang2 Jie2 端午节) = a festival celebrated with rice dumplings on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month; also known as Duan1 Wu3 Jie2 端午节. Details in Facts and Figures.

Laoyezi (lao3 ye2 zi3 老爷子) = a polite form of address for an old man. There is no appropriate English equivalent, so the original Chinese will be used.

The six 'yang' channels of the hand and the foot = The Hand Yangming Channel of the Colon, The Foot Yangming Channel of the Stomach, The Hand Taiyang Channel of the Small Intestine, The Foot Taiyang Channel of the Urinary Bladder, The Hand Shaoyang Channel of the Three Visceral Cavities and The Foot Shaoyang Channel of the Gall Bladder. Details in Facts and Figures.

In the 2nd edition, the old woman instructs Shi Potian to exercise his internal strength through the 'Hand Shaoyang Channel of the Gall Bladder' (shou3 shao4 yang2 dan3 jing1 手少阳胆经), which does not exist. This error is corrected in the 3rd edition, by changing 'Gall Bladder' to 'Three Visceral Cavities'.

The sentence "I am really very sorry" is found only in the 3rd edition.

The phrase "struck you on the top of the head with his palm" is found only in the 3rd edition.

This move was known as 'Either Left or Right' (Huo4 Zuo3 Huo4 You4 或左或右) in the 2nd edition.

The sentence "In addition, Shi Potian's actions had also violated the essentials of pugilistic studies" is found only in the 3rd edition.

In the 2nd edition, Ding Busi did not elaborate on the benefits of staying at the Isle of the Azure Conch. He merely said: "You will be able to recuperate well in my home, for it is a very comfortable place."

Maternal Grandmother (po po 婆婆 po2 po2) = in terms of traditional forms

of address, women are always referred to as if they were relatives of the speaker's mother. Hence, Shi Potian addressed the old woman as "Maternal Grandmother". This will be shortened henceforth to "Grandmother" unless where the full term of address is necessary.

The phrase "so please give me some pointers" is found only in the 3rd edition.

The phrase "that he ate a few more persimmons" is found only in the 3rd edition.

In the 2nd edition, Grandmother Shi was on the left while A'Xiu was on the right.

In the 2nd edition, the trio walked for less than a li (500 metres).

Chapter 10 - The Sabre Technique of the Golden Crow

A'Xiu picked up the battered woodsman's cleaver and slowly executed a pose. Then, she brought the cleaver into a horizontal position before pushing it outwards. Finally, she sent the blade sweeping towards the left, drew it back and sent it stabbing diagonally into the right.

When the trio woke up the next morning, they ate several persimmons. Then, Shi Potian helped both Grandmother Shi and her grand-daughter to unblock yet another channel each on their bodies. Consequently, the women regained the use of their arms.

"Big Rice Dumpling," said Grandmother Shi, "there is a small lake here where crabs can be found. Go and catch some of these crabs. Although the crabs have not grown fat(1), eating them is still better than having persimmons day in and day out."

However, Shi Potian was hesitant. "It is not difficult to catch the crabs," he said, "but we do not have a way to cook them. Neither can we eat them raw."

"How unbecoming!" said Grandmother Shi. "How can a young and energetic man like you be so fearful of that ghastly old Ding Busan?"

"Even if we do not talk about Grandfather Ding Busan," answered Shi Potian with a shake of his head, "Ding Ding Dang Dang alone is already so much better than I. If they catch me, tie me up like a big rice dumpling again and throw be back into the river, it will be horrible."

At this point, A'Xiu spoke up: "Grandmother, this Elder Brother here is right. We should just endure our situation for the time being, and wait until all the channels in your body have been unblocked. Once your strength returns, we will no longer have to be afraid of Ding Busan and Ding Busi."

"Hmmp, you make it sound as if this is a trivial matter," replied Grandmother Shi with a snort. "Can a person recover her strength as easily as she speaks? It will take at least ten days before all the channels on our bodies are unblocked. Then, we will need another eight months to a year before our strength returns in

full. Are we really going to eat persimmons every day for the next twelve months? Besides, all the persimmons will be rotten in less than ten days."

"Well, we do not have to worry about that," said Shi Potian. "I will go and pick some persimmons, and dry them in the sun. Then, with dried fruit to eat for a year or so, we will not starve to death." After experiencing so many frustrating and incomprehensible difficulties and dangers in recent days, he felt that things might be better if he were to pass his days in peaceful seclusion at the cave. After all, this seemed to be a far safer and happier option.

"So you are willing to act like a tortoise that draws its head into its shell," snapped Grandmother Shi angrily. "But I will not do it. Besides, that scoundrel Ding Busi will extend his search to this island within a day or two. Then, you will not be able to act like a tortoise even if you wanted to. Big Rice Dumpling, what exactly is going on with you? Why do you possess such a rich reservoir of internal strength in vain, when you have not taken up any training in martial arts?"

"But I have really not taken any proper lessons from anyone," answered Shi Potian, feeling somewhat embarrassed. "Ding Ding Dang Dang taught me her Seizing Technique with eighteen moves, so it is only natural that I am unable to defeat her or her grandfather. As for the moves that Old Grandfather Ding Busi taught me, there is nothing among them that he does not already know."

Suddenly, A'Xiu interrupted the exchange: "Grandmother, why do you not give this Elder Brother here some pointers on a few moves? If he learns your pugilistic techniques and defeats Ding Busi after that, would that not be more glorious than seizing victory in your own hands?"

Grandmother Shi did not reply. Instead, she fixed her eyes on Shi Potian and stared hard at him. Suddenly, her eyes were filled with terrible viciousness and hate. Her hands began to quiver, as if they were about to grab Shi Potian and have him bitten to death.

Frightened, the young man stood up and backed away. "Old Madame," he said, "you ... you ..."

Ignoring him, Grandmother Shi spoke to her grand-daughter in a stern voice: "A'Xiu, take another look at him. Is the resemblance not there?"

A'Xiu's large eyes turned themselves on to Shi Potian's face, but the expression

in them was a lot more gentle and amiable. "Grandmother," said the young woman, "the resemblance exists, but ... but he is definitely not the one. If he ... he had a tenth of this Elder Brother's honesty and kindness, he would not have ... would not have ..."

The resentful glint in Grandmother Shi's eyes subsided. With a snort of disgust, she said, "Although he is not the one, there is still too much resemblance between them. I will certainly not teach him anything."

Almost at once, Shi Potian understood: Yes, she thought that I am the other Shi Potian. That Clan-Leader Shi has certainly offended a lot of people, for there are actually so many people under the sun who hate him. If I see him in the future, I should really give him some advice.

Just then, he heard Grandmother Shi ask: "Is your surname Shi?"

"No!" answered Shi Potian, shaking his head. "Everyone says that I am Clan-Leader Shi from the Clan of Eternal Happiness, but I am actually not. Not even by the slightest bit. Sigh, I have repeated this many times, but no one believes me." He heaved a long sigh in deep frustration.

"I believe that you are not," said A'Xiu in a quiet voice.

"You really do?" asked Shi Potian, raising his voice in delight. "That ... that is excellent! You are the only one who believes me!"

"You are a good man," said A'Xiu. "He ... he is a bad one. Both of you are totally different."

Grabbing the young woman's hands in a moment of impulse, Shi Potian said, "Thank you very much! Thank you very much! Thank you very much!" In recent days, everyone he met had assumed that he was Clan-Leader Shi, so much so that he had no way to start explaining otherwise. Now, he felt just like a wrongly-accused prisoner who had been given a sudden exoneration by the Great Master Qingtian and his Mirror of Understanding(2), for as he thanked A'Xiu profusely, tears of gratitude fell from his eyes and on to the young woman's slim and fair hands.

A'Xiu turned red with embarrassment, yet she could not bear to pull her hands away from Shi Potian's grasp.

"If you are, you are," said Grandmother Shi in a cold voice. "If you are not, you are not. How unbecoming for a man to weep and wail!"

"Yes!" said Shi Potian. As he raised a hand to wipe his tears, he suddenly realised that he was still holding on to A'Xiu's hands. Shocked, he quickly said, "I am sorry, I am sorry!" As he released her hands, he added, "I ... I ... I am going to pick more persimmons." He ran straight off, not daring to cast another look at the young woman.

When Grandmother Shi saw how awkward Shi Potian felt, as well as how genuine the awkwardness was, she could not help but be amused. "So he is not," she said with a sigh. "If that little beast who is surnamed Shi had but a tenth of Big Rice Dumpling's honesty and kindness, he would not have ... sigh!"

Before long, rustling sounds could be heard among the trees outside the cave. Shi Potian rushed up, looking pale and panicky. "Oh no ...," he said in a trembling voice, "we are in a terrible mess!"

"Why?" asked Grandmother Shi. "What is wrong? Has Ding Busan seen you?"

Shi Potian complied and went into the wood to look for another branch, after looking around for a while; he saw a rusted saber used for cutting firewood under a tree. He quickly bent down to pick it up to find out that the hilt had already decayed and the saber had many chips. It seemed to pretty old and a bit heavy too. Holding the saber, he told himself; "This black saber is rusty, but it's still better than those tree branches." He pulled out what's left of the old handle, picked up a tree branch nearby, squeezed it into the hilt to get a makeshift grip and walked back in high spirit.

Grandma Shi and A'Xiu saw this rusted handle and rotten hatchet and were unable to restrain their laugh.

A'Xiu smiled and said: "Grandma, this expensive saber has cut the big mountain and now this treasured saber will be used to teach senior disciple martial arts...quite an irony.

Grandma Shi said: "what's the irony? Our golden phoenix school will reign over all the wulin, it will rule the realm of river and lakes and by this handle....this handle of the treasured sword...Ha!" As she spoke the word "Treasured sword", she herself can't stop from smiling. All the three people started laughing.

Granny Shi smiled and said: "Well remember, the first move of Golden phoenix skill is called 'to ask for trouble' ". She picked up a short branch, slowly took a posture and said "I cannot move my hands and feet quickly but you actually have to move them fast, the faster the better".

Shi Potian looked at the hatchet and moved it accordingly adjusting to its model very quickly and making loud sound of the wind out of saber.

Grandma Shi nods and said: "very good, so familiar, but you have to do it again and quicker.

This mode of 'to ask for trouble' is used to restraint the snow mountain sect's move of 'green pines to receive a guest '. They are hypocritical in receiving a guest; we while on the other hand we are direct and even welcome the thief, will probably bow to salute an opposite party salute, when actually in heart think of them as bandits and thieves.

The second move 'Snow Blossom meets the summer ' is to restrain ' Snow Blossom to struggle the spring ' move. To tackle this snowy mountain sword technique 'the plum blossom five petals', or also called 'snowflake six', we can use 'Snow Blossom meets the summer'.

Now what power and prestige does the plum blossom, Snowflake have against summer?"

This move of swordsmanship 'Snow Blossom struggles the spring ' is really complicated, Shi Potian has seen this move from Bai Wanjian, the sword's luminance ,its big power and influence, however he had not learnt it in the temple of the village god. The moves of saber skill 'Snow Blossom meets the summer' lies in three saber thrusts, then next three saber swipe downwards, then three saber strokes on left and right, including chops in succession, here one pays no attention to opposite party sword however it changes, and subdues it by an overwhelming power, ruthless strength and dispels the complicated sword move of the opposite party, exactly like a hot summer day does to snowflake on its arrival.

That third move is called the 'thousand honored pressure camels', it restrains the snowy mountain sect's move 'camel next to west'; The fourth move of 'sea sinks the sand ' is to restrain the 'sandstorm to be luxuriant '; The fifth move of

`scorching red date ' restrains the `moonlight pale yellow ', next move is to win darkly by the light; Seventh move of `falls in with bad company' restrains the `dark fragrant sparse shade '.

Each move of saber skill has a strange name, is in sharp opposition all with a snowy mountain sword's move name and although the name were strange, saber skills actually was very fine and wonderful.

Shi Potian was illiterate, doesn't knew a character, all these name of saber skill moves were mostly from the book of idioms, he naturally didn't not understand, also cannot remember , he only tried to memorize the saber stances, their positions and the hand signal attentively. Granny Shi spoke but hand movements were really slow, Shi Potian couldn't grasp it clearly so he stopped and adjusted. Although he has seen the sword skill in temple of village god, here the difficulty was of course at entirely different level.

After Grandma Shi had given 18 strokes, she had a sense of fatigue and rested immediately, turning a blind eye and let Shi Potian to practice. After some time she passed 18 more strokes. By evening she had passed all the 72 moves meanwhile she also taught the rest of the 9 moves he forgot (of Snow Mountain Sect).

Grandma Shi said: "the Snow Mountain sect's sword skill has 72 moves, as soon as my Golden Phoenix School will send its martial-arts everywhere to win we will have actually 73 moves. Our 73 moves will break their 72 moves; this is the last move, look carefully to understand. She said and took a branch unhurriedly held it vertically from top as well as bottom and hacked it in two in parts and said "When you use this move, you must do it without fail and jump in the air and divide it straight with your body". She taught him how to jump vertically, how to transport force and how to block opposite party to run away and escape.

Shi Potian meditates for half of the day, in accordance with the move taught, jumped, brandished a sword from the midair and divided straight down and shouted, the saber pointing towards the ground, it stopped after it gets about a third of meter inside the earth, dust and sand flies upwards, the withered grass and fallen leaf is stirred up all round by the saber wind and started dancing round and round it with surprising power.

As soon as Shi Potian completed the move and managed to stand, he saw Grandma Shi, she had a look of deathly pale, and he turned the head to look at A'Xiu, and actually saw a pair of big drop of tears in her eyes, obviously looking very sad. Shi Potian lip's stammered: "my this move ...Is this not correct"?

Grandma Shi did not spoke for the moment, beckons with her hand said: "Right",

Stayed for a while, and then said: "this move is very formidable and may not be used lightly in order to avoid accidental injuries to the good people."

Shi Potian said: "yes, yes! Good people should not be injured."

That entire night he (Shi Potian) in between his sleep tossed and turned gesticulating the 73 moves of saber skills in the heart, actually preparing for the powerful enemy who were searching him outside. Fortunately this Azure Mist island although is not that big area wise, is actually surrounded by numerous overgrown trees, and the mountain trails were very many, so Bai Wanjian didn't found them and left near 1'oclock.

On the second morning dawn, he (Shi Potian) got up and practiced his saber skills, practiced the 73rd move straight thrust, the vertical leap midair, a saber split and got down, this time with formidable power, the saber wind hit ground creating sound of something being struck or falling to the ground with loud booming voice.

A'Xiu heard only at her back and said: "ShiBrother Shi, you get up early in the morning."

Shi Potian turned around, and saw her leaning against a stone, a pair of wonderful eyes staring at him and said: "you are also early."

A'Xiu face turned a bit red, she said: "I was thinking of taking a walk in the forest, good for health, will you accompany me, is it fine?"

Shi Potian said: "Well, the meridians of your body are blocked and they need more activity."

They both walked side by side immediately in to the forest, entered the deep woods, this time the sunlight has not yet reached entirely, the forest was filled with the mist giving a surreal look to the ambience, the grass, the trees, A'Xiu

body, her face covered with a gauze. In the forest silences reigns, only two people tread above the dried grass, exuding a very slow rustle.

Suddenly, Shi Potian heard several sobs on his side; he turned his head, only to see A'Xiu sobbing, the crystal clear teardrops flowing off slowly from her cheeks. Shi Potian was startled, asked: "A'Xiu girl, youWhy do you cry?"

A'Xiu didn't answer, walked several steps, caught a tree trunk and cried even more sadly.

Shi Potian said: "why? Has Grandma Shi scolded you?"

A'Xiu shakes her head.

Shi Potian also asked: "Are you feeling uncomfortable, is that it?"

A'Xiu shakes her head again.

Shi Potian asked 7-8 types of reasons, A'Xiu only shake the head. All of sudden he had no idea, in the past all the females he met like his mother, Shi Jian, Ding Dang, Hua Wan Zi and so on, all were straightforward character or from older generation, Shi Madame Min Rou her manner was temperate and naturally dignified too, but he never saw any one like A'Xiu, a charming bashful girl. In reality he did not know how to deal with this. A'Xiu sobbed more, he got flustered and said: "for what matter?"

You said to me, okay?" said A'Xiu. She said "isisYouYou are not good, youYouMust ask!"

Shi Potian was shocked and thought "have done I something wrong, she already said that is he is not good, He said gently to A'Xiu with respect "A'Xiu, you told me that I

am a fool, and has done wrong things, didn't knew really and should die seriously "

A'Xiu looked from her tearful eyes over his shoulders and said:" Last night I saw a dream, very scary, you you were so fierce to me!", having said that, the tears flow like a broken string pearls falling down.

Shi Potian said:" I'm tough on you"

A Xiu: "yes ah, I dreamed of you; that I will be killed from the Golden Phoenix

saber's 73rd move."

Shi Potian startled, clenched his fist and struck his chest and said after a moment: "Damn, damn! I am frightened of your dream."

A'Xiu smiled through her tears and said: "Brother Shi, that was my dream obviously you cannot blame yourself. Shi Potian saw her cheeks glistening with tears but a smile appeared tender, full of life, he cannot help himself looking at her like an imbecile.

A'Xiu face turned red, felt a slight shiver and said: "My dreams are often accurate; I am afraid that in future you really use this move against us and will kill me.

Shi Potian shakes his head again and again, said: " It is impossible to even think that I will kill you, let alone to kill you, no way, instead you must kill me, II will not fight back."

A'Xiu looked at her and said: "if I must kill you, why won't you fight back?"

Shi Potian put out a hand to scratch his head, laughed foolishly and said: "I thinkI think that no matter what you want me to do I would to be obedient you and listen to your words. You must really kill me. If you will not kill me, you won't be happy. So it's better for you to kill me"

A'Xiu felt perplexed after listening and thought that his words are sincere and is really stemming from the bottom of one's heart; cannot help but in the heart felt grateful, said: "youwhy are you so good to me?"

Shi Potian said: "As long as you are happy, I just can't say how fond of you I am. A'Xiu I....I really want to look at you like this for the rest of my life." He said those words as he thought in his heart. A'Xiu although younger than his age was more versed in worldly affairs and thought that he was actually asking him to accompany him for his life, like a family member. She was unable to restrain, her whole face turned red including her neck.

For a long time, no one said a word. After a while, A'Xiu whispered: "I know you

are a good man, not to mention it also happened in that ship, we were
... we were in same bed, I I would rather die but will not go to another

person. "

She meant that the heavens had made the plans for them to meet, your whole body was tied up, and you ended up in my bedding that night, actually these words were too shameful to speak, when she said `we were in same bed ' , the sound was barely audible.

Shi Potian didn't realize that her words were vows for living together and kind of treaty of alliance, but he knew she was well aware of his good heart, felt ecstatic and said suddenly: "If on this island only your paternal grandmother and us, we three people are there, we may forever live in here, but alas Bai Wanjian, Grandpa Ding Busi are also here so we have to live in fear."

A'Xiu looked up and said: "Ding Busi, Bai Wanjian, I do not fear them but actually I only fear that you will kill me in the future."

Shi Potian said anxiously: "I rather first kill myself, before causing any injury to even your little finger."

A'Xiu brought her left hand, looked at her own palm, by now the sunlight has entered in to the forest through the leaves, she saw few of her fingers transparent such as agate. Shi Potian can not help but took her hand, kissed on her lips.

A'Xiu made "ah" sound, all of a sudden withdraws her hand, felt all her limbs weak, relying upon a tree, panting for breath.

Shi Potian anxiously said: "A'Xiu girl, you should not be offended. III did not want to offend you. I will not dare next time, really wont dare again." A'Xiu saw him to be anxious, sweat flowing from his left hand and said: "you have not offended me. Next timenext time.....don't dare."

Shi Potian felt great happiness, his heart thumping madly, grasped her delicate little hands tenderly again but did not dare to kiss her again.

A'Xiu rested bit and said: "Although my grandmother and I have made you to unblock the meridians, but I do not know what time or year can we return.

Shi Potian didn't take much of it as some merit or achievement and just for idle talk said:" We only hope that Grandpa Ding Busi does not find us, then it doesn't matter if your grandmother regains her strength or not."

A'Xiu said: "how is your grandmother, my grandmother? She is the Master of the Golden Phoenix School and your master and you even don't call her master."

Shi Potian:" yes, yes. I am not used to call her that. A'Xiu girl ..Tell me how to call you?"

A'Xiu with her cheeks red, said: "you should call me 'A'Xiu younger sister ' and then I can call you a 'Big Brother' '."

But in the end her face eventually became tender, said: "you can call me `A'Xiu ', but what do I call you?"

Shi Potian said: "you can call me anything".

A'Xiu said with a smile: "I will call you big steamed rice dumpling, are you angry?"

Shi Potian says with a smile: "It is good....very good, why would I be angry?"

A'Xiu cried in her sweet and delicate voice: "Big steamed rice dumpling!"

Shi Potian said: "A'Xiu". Both looked at each other to smile with joy in the hearts that can not put into words.

Shi Potian said: "Are you too tired to stand, let's sit down and talk."

Now the two sat side by side under a tree. A'Xiu long hairs were hanging by her shoulder and as the sunlight falls on her dark hair it shimmered with a little flash. Her hairs on the right side stroked Shi Potian on his chest, Shi Potian took her hand and combed gently with her fingers.

A Xiu: "big brother steamed rice dumpling, if I have not met you, Grandma and I have been drowned in the Yangtze River in it, then where would have been a moment like this.

Shi Potian said:" If you were not going through the boat then I would have drowned in the Yangtze River even before you. Everyone should look for moment like this in his life, to be happy, why study martial arts to hit me, I hit you, harm other people. It's really sad.

I do not understand really."

A'Xiu said: "One has to certainly study martial arts. In this world there are

many unprincipled person, even if you do not hit them still they come to hit you. Even to get hit lets say is fine but to get killed is unacceptable. Steamed rice dumpling elder brother, I want to ask you something?"

Shi Potian said: "of course! You can ask me anything, I'll do that."

A'Xiu said: "my paternal grandmother's Golden Phoenix blade skill, indeed is very fierce, your internal energy is also strong, after completing your practice, in the martial arts world a very few some people are your match. However I am very much worried about one matter, you are upright honest however in jiang hu a lot of people have heart set on evil cheats, these unprincipled people will cause the trick to harm you, you will definitely suffer a great deal. Therefore I ask you be little firm to your enemies."

Shi Potian nods said: "you are good for me; I am willing to listen to your words."

A thin layer of blush panned over A'Xiu face, she said: "In the future, do not say that you will not listen to me. You said yourself and must follow. It is not a joke on you; you said it with the spirit of a real man." She paused and said: "I look at this Golden Phoenix blade skill grandmother is teaching you; this move is really sinister to kill,

In future if someone offends there will be many deaths as a result."

Shi Potian got alarmed and afraid, said: "you said rightly, it would be better for me to not study this set of blade skills, ask your paternal grandmother to do not teach it to others."

A'Xiu shook her head and said: "She has ability to use these blade skills, not the others. Furthermore, regardless of what martial arts, it will definitely kill other people. If it cannot kill then it is not martial arts. Where it is possible to let people off, one should spare them; anyone can make mistakes, forgive them when possible."

Shi Potian said: "Where it is possible to let people off, one should spare them; anyone can make mistakes, forgive them when possible, A'Xiu well said, you are really smart, these words are very good.

A'Xiu smiles and said "I am really smart, come to think so ...these are the lines

from a poem actually.

Shi Potian asks: "what poem?" He did not even know a character or word, so how would he know about poetry.

A'Xiu saw a look of surprise in his eyes so she thought he did not really understand; so she said: "I want you to forgive others but in the martial arts world, lots of people are sinister and cheat, if you are not careful, opposite party will seize the opportunity to execute plots that might harm you. Elder brother, I know a move, it is very subtle and might help in future. Let me show you."

She took the rotten blade from Shi Potian and stood up slowly, took a posture, with the blade in horizontal position, the saber pointed towards left, took a swipe and then immediately dragged it towards right, then instead of chopping towards right all of sudden stabbed it straight downwards.

Shi Potian saw her in this beautiful posture, her cloth belt floating, and the attitude wonderful. Nothing can be compared to see this frail delicate girl using the blade so gracefully. He was so relaxed and spirited that he didn't even remember the blade strokes.

A'Xiu recovered her sword stance, stepped back two steps, withdrew the blade and said: "To retrieve the blade afterwards, it's necessary to incite your internal energy and protect yourself from both right and left for a sneak attack by the enemy.

Shi Potian was ecstatic, lost in his own thoughts barely heard what she said.

A'Xiu asked: "what? This move is good isn't it?"

Shi Potian stumped for words, said: "ThisThis"

A'Xiu said in anger: "I know that you are the eldest disciple of Golden Phoenix sect, it was pretty stupid of me to show you my three legged cat skills.

Shi Potian panicked for a moment and said quickly: "I am sorry, I looked at you and you looked really attractive, forgot to see the blade move, Can you show me again, A'Xiu guniang (guniang: young girl/Miss)"

A'Xiu feigns anger, said: "show you again...you called me A'Xiu guniang".

Shi Potian extended his hand to strike his forehead and said: "I should die, I

always forget...A'Xiu, A'Xiu, please show me again".

She said with a smile: "Fine, but don't ask me to do it a third time."

She repeated the moves, taking the correct posture and with the blade in horizontal position, the saber pointed towards left, took a swipe and thrusts it downwards.

This time Shi Potian was well awake and remembered her hand movements, her steps, blade position and the entire stance etched in his mind.

Afterwards A'Xiu urged him to take the blade and encouraged him to try these moves. He already had remembered these moves by heart so repeated them exactly.

A'Xiu saw him immediately grasping this move and was overjoyed in her heart.

She said approvingly: "Elder brother, you are really intelligent; you just need the intent and can learn anything very quickly. This move of blade skill is called 'To make a veiled attack'. The blade edge arrives and then the internal energy and the other details.

Shi Potian said: "This move was very good, goes right and then left, moves up and down unpredictably; for a enemy it virtually impossible to guard against."

A'Xiu said: "This is the beauty of this trick and forgive. In a martial art contest as soon as any move is executed, it either kills its opponent or injures him badly. However during this move your body arches back so even if you are fierce still it won't kill the opponent or badly injure him.

Shi Potian saw her leaning on the tree with her shoulders and tiring herself, said: "you are tired and you should sit down."

A'Xiu folded her knees to kneel down slowly and sat on her heels and asked: "Have you heard me?"

Shi Potian said: "yes I heard. This move is called "knocks...side knocks". (Some play of words although he was listening attentively still was illiterate and name was derived from an idiom so made the mistake).

A'Xiu said: "Well, you are distracted; don't look at me."

Although she remarked jokingly, Shi Potian turned his head and no longer saw

her.

A'Xiu smiled and said: "this move is called 'to make a veiled attack '. Eldest brother, in the martial arts world, popular figures are mostly good people. To become famous person one can get injured, but if one gets defeated more often then not he dies because of loss of reputation. Therefore in a martial arts contest disputes, person should be conservative. If you had already won, then you might as well use this move, other people get dazzled but afterward withdraw two step and take back the pointed weapons, even if some people are looking, they won't know that who won and who lost.

This way your opponent can save his face and you can win his respect. If you speak one or two speeches of flattery such as: 'Your Excellency, your sword skill is exquisite, really you. Today, victory or defeat will be hard to distinguish, so in light of this why don't we stop and everybody become friends'. As soon as such words come opponent understands that you are yielding intentionally and actually don't want to injure his reputation. Then he would be friendly with you".

Shi Potian listened carefully in admiration and said: "A'Xiu, you are young in age but how can you understand so much things. This method is really good."

A'Xiu said with a smile: "I said don't and here now again you are looking at me".

Shi Potian had turned his head, he saw only her cheeks and saw her grinning and looking at him, he can't help his heart to sway in ecstasy.

A'Xiu said "What do I know; I see adults people doing things, listen to them a lot."

Shi Potian said: "I should try it again so I don't forget". Then he leaped immediately and executed the move 'To make a veiled attack'.

A'Xiu nodded saying: "Perfect, you haven't missed a single stance".

Shi Potian sat next to her. A'Xiu sighed suddenly, said: "Eldest brother, I taught you this move of 'to make a veiled attack ', but do not say to paternal grandmother."

Shi Potian said: "I will not say about it, I know that your grandmother might not happy."

A'Xiu said: "How do you know grandma will not be happy?"

Shi Potian said: "you are not a disciple of Golden Phoenix sect and if I a disciple of this school learn martial art from others naturally she won't like it."

As soon as Arab League embroiders smiled, said: "Golden Phoenix school and my school are nothing but same; just a mirror reflection. My Grandma acts sometimes like child."

Shi Potian said: "I know that your Grandma has really a little child's temperament. Grandpa Ding Busi asked her to go to the blue spiral island, go there and that's the end, so why also lead you to throw in the river with her?"

Blue Spiral Island might have been un-amusing but that's not that important. Actually Ding Busi Grandpa is very good to your Grandma but she scolds him unceasingly and he was not angry. Your Grandma is very good but actually ominous to him."

A'Xiu said with a smile: "you spoke malicious remarks about your master behind back, I will take care that she knows about it, then she will pull out your muscle, peel your skin."

Although Shi Potian saw her to smile saying it, actually in his heart was somewhat alarmed, and anxiously said: "I will not say next time."

A'Xiu saw through his facial expression that he was terrified, and felt apologetic, and thought that she had bullied a very honest and good-natured person, also thought that she herself has guided him to study this move of 'to make a veiled attack ', although it is harmless to him, it has to be kept for oneself: "Eldest brother, you have already agreed to not injure anyone or kill in martial art contest, II really feel grateful. I do not know how I may repay, many thanks to you." She bent down to him to kowtow immediately.

Shi Potian was startled, said: "you howHow can you kowtow me?" and also kneels down busily, kowtows in returns salute.

Suddenly they heard a distant sound of a female shouting angrily: "You have no sense of shame. Even not concerned about your face, you in have bowed to heaven and earth with this person!"

That he heard was precisely the sound of a Ding dang.

Shi Potian startled and leapt hurriedly saying "Ah yo! ...Dingdingdangdang". Then he saw her coming out of woods and Ding Busan following him out of forest.

As soon as Shi Potian saw these two people, he got frightened; he bent and grabbed the A'Xiu by her waist and ran in the opposite direction frantically. However Ding Busan was really quick and he leapt up and down a few times and promptly blocked his way.

Shi Potian cried: "Ah yo" and changed his direction and ran in other direction. His lightness martial art was not better than Ding Busan and especially carrying A'Xiu, he was no match. At any moment Ding Busan was going to catch them.

At the same time Ding dang also was catching up. Shi Potian saw a glittering lance in her hands and his heart thumped once again. He heard her shouting angrily: "Put down that sl*t and let me kill her by my lance and we will live forever.

Shi Potian said: "It's not good, it's not good!" Ding dang strike with lance at A'Xiu.

Shi Potian was terrified that Ding dang will hack A'Xiu to death, he turned and leapt vertically, with his unconscious strength and formidable internal energy; suddenly he was leaping high and high in the air even higher than the pine trees.

His leap was exceptional and no doubt both Ding dang and Ding Busan were surprised.

Shi Potian also cried in mid air: "Ah yo". He thought that once he will fall, his leg tendons will break and the Ding dang will kill A'Xiu. How can this be good?

He saw that both his legs fall on the pine tree branch, panic-stricken he made an effort to brace it with his legs and hoping that he can run far away.

Then he heard the sound of the branch breaking up and suddenly his body was in a free fall, his body making hu-hu sound as he was flying downwards.

He heard A'Xiu saying: "when fall trying to make yourself light and then..." even before her word were finished Shi Potian felt both his feet falling on another branch of pine tree, it curved like a bow immediately but didn't broke and instead actually shoots them far higher in the air. The sound of Ding dang

scolding them slowly started fading.

Shi Potian really enjoyed this jumping and falling and especially with A'Xiu in his arms giving him direction he was able to use his abundant internal energy to vertically leap from a branch to another.

Although his internal energy was very good but his lightness martial art knowledge was almost zero however once he started to imitate the apes, squirrels monkey etc he really felt exhilarated, unrestrained and infinite pleasantness, said: "This method is really good, this way they won't be able to catch up soon."

He got to the end of the forest and heard some sound of shouts and also saw some reflections, obviously those sunlight reflection was from some pointed weapons, and some people were in a fight.

Shi Potian said: "This is not good. There are some people and may not let us pass."

He put his left foot on a branch, stepped gently, following the method A'Xiu told him, took a full breath and started gliding gently along the stem carrying A'Xiu with him.

He hid behind a large pine tree and started looking for the source of commotion but couldn't help himself to get shocked.

Between the gaps of two pine trees he actually saw two people in fight, one holding a long sword was actually Bai Wanjian and other person was an empty handed Ding Busi.

Several disciple of Snow Mountain sect surrounded them and were watching both of them fight with rapt attention and tacitly supporting Bai Wanjian. Although Ding Busi didn't had any weapon but he was using his palms to seize, pokes, grasp, to counter attack like a pair of fierce weapons. However Bai Wanjian was an experienced fighter and he used his long sword to attack as well as defend.

Shi Potian looked to figure out the moves used by both of them and concentrates completely and even forgot that he has a muddy person in his bosom. He had already studied the Snow Mountain sword skills and also the skill

from Ding Busi however he had not taught him all the variations still he managed to link them to what he already has learnt from him by some logical thinking.

When two senior masters fight, the fight is extremely tight as no one dares to make any mistake and uses the majority of the martial arts they have learnt. Ding Busi was moving for an assault, his both palms like a sword and halberd. Bai Wanjian was forced to defend, while his defensive moves were too many and offensive move few but Bai Wanjian was extremely calm, unadorned also restraining. It really looked like if Ding Busi was to win it has to be very long fight and won't be easy. He (Shi Potian) only feared that Bai Wanjian will be on the winning side.

Shi Potian didn't knew at this point, of course as he didn't knew much about Ding Busi and Bai Wanjian. Actually Ding Busi and father of Bai Wanjian, 'Proud and Virtue Gentleman' Bai Zizai were from same generation so as he couldn't fight with a person of lower generation without losing his face so he agreed to fight empty handed against the long sword. But as soon as the fight started he started attacking with his palms variations with strong internal energy forcing his opponent to be very cautious, even if it was Bai Zizai in his heydays in wulin would have feared it.

Ding Busi attacked relentlessly and displayed exquisite moves but was countered effectively and if there was no recourse then will had to risk danger of mutually wounding both of them and thus was compelled to draw back. Bai Wanjian. Always took advantage with each step, didn't struggle with him and showed a lot of wisdom. Although there wasn't much difference between their martial art but since Ding Busi was not using his 'Golden nine soft whip' which he wrapped around his waist he was at obvious disadvantage.

After some 20 moves Bai Wanjian said: "Uncle Ding, you can use your nine whips, don't fight empty-handed anymore."

Ding Busi got angry said: "Bullshit, don't fight empty-handed! You try this move!" Drawing a circle of his left hand, the right hand fist jabs at exits from the circle. This move was very unusual. Bai Wanjian didn't fully understood and withdrew back one step. Ding Busi laughed at him, suddenly his right foot hit the ground, his body springs toward left, it looked at though his both feet left the ground, flew suddenly, then both feet kicked rapidly in the midair. Bai Wanjian

withdrew back one step again and wielded his sword to protect himself.

Ding Busi suddenly moved swiftly left and then suddenly right, only looking at it Shi Potian felt dazzled. All of sudden he heard a sound which scoffed, on the Ding Busi right leg pants was long crack although he suffered no injuries.

Bai Wanjian drew back his sword and said: "please yield!"

For masters competing in a martial arts contest, one move is the difference between victory and defeat.

Ding Busi became angry out of shame, shouts to clear the way: "who yields?

This move of you was a piece of luck, what is it called?"

This move was called "the boat sailing against the current".

Bai Wanjian has attacked and cut the opponent's pants leg a moment ago said: "this is of course good luck."

Ding Busi just out of fierce and arrogance was not able to wield kicks fully and in anger made the mistake.

The Snow Mountain sect's numerous disciples looked at themselves with self-satisfaction, some people made noise and commended: "you look at the senior fellow-pupil this move of 'moonlight dusk' was so vague, obscure and ambiguous that Senior Ding Busi was thrown into confusion, if not for Senior fellow-pupil forgiving sword, his body had already been hung out colored streamers."

Then they heard: "Bullshit!" that too from two people. Everyone expected it from Ding Busi but strangely it also came from the north-east direction. As if by prior agreement everybody vision shifted in that direction. Watching these two people Shi Potian was frightened to his heart...one was Ding Busan and other Ding dang.

Ding Busi called out: "Third brother, you get out of the way! I have to take care of these people, what are you doing here?" he was concentrating completely on Bai Wanjian.

Ding Busan said: "Bullshit" two characters, he then knew that was the elder brother arrived.

Ding Busan said with a smile: "I must take a look at you; you are still not

showing any improvement in your martial art."

Ding Busi was anxious, he knew for sure that in present circumstance when he was unable to win, this will be viewed as supremacy by his brother as since childhood both had fierce competition.

He called out loudly: "you only breed confusion my mind, I am already distracted my attention by speaking with you, how I will beat others?"

Ding Busan smiled and said: "you do not need to speak with me, fight with single-hearted devotion."

He then turned his head towards Ding Dang and said: "Your fourth grandfather has always said that his martial-arts is unmatched in this world and better compared to all his brothers. Now open your eyes and look carefully at your fourth grandfather, once he used his mighty pair of palms, people who want to fight will admit defeat, will kneel and will beg for mercy. Ha-ha!" The laughter was strange and it hummed uncomfortably in everyone's ears.

Ding Busi asked: "Third brother, what are you laughing about?"

Ding Busan replied with a smile: "I am laughing at you."

Ding Busi got angry and said: "Why are you laughing at me, Do I look funny?"

Ding Busan said: "I am laughing at your life, your entire life you have been striving to out do others but whenever you are in any danger you have to rely on your elder brother to help you out."

Ding Busi got angrier and said: "This Bai Wanjian is from a later generation; if I was not giving face to his parents I would have already killed him with my palms. In what danger am I, who wants to help me out...! Ouch! This young fellow is taking advantage of someone in precarious situation."

Ding was empty handed and Bai Wanjian was ready with his long sword, he was talking in anger with Ding Busan and diverted all his attention to him, he had no defense ready, Bai Wanjian took opportunity of this favorable situation and attacked his left shoulder, blood immediately started dripping out.

Ding Busan and his all four brothers did quarreled in their childhood but it wasn't the case as though they hated or disliked each other. When Ding Busan

saw his younger brother get hurt he was unable to restrain himself and shouted angrily: "Young fellow, you dared to injure my third brother!" He attacked Bai Wanjian shouting and made him to retreat.

When Bai Wanjian was attacked his mind was not chaotic, he stepped back and defended and positioned himself such that he won't come out in open with his back towards Ding Busi.

Ding Busi cried: "Third brother draw back, who wants you to help me?"

Ding Busan said: "Who is helping you. This young fellow is not fighting a fair fight. I will make him to lose as much blood as your and then it will be a fair fight."

The Snow Mountain sect's disciples saw that their fellow apprentices is attacked by two people, and Ding Busan had already killed two disciple of their sect earlier and was their personal enemy, they shouted in unison and attacked simultaneously.

Ding Busan shouted to clear the way: "you son-of-a-*****es are really impatient, come all of you!"

He actually saw the reflection of numerous swords, at the same time several long swords attacked to stab him. Ding Busan evaded that attack and called out loudly: "don't get impatient; your old man will take care of you all today."

Bai Wanjian knew that these fellows are no way in match of him, and it would be a real massacre so called out anxiously: "everybody draws back!"

The Snow Mountain sect disciples did not dare to defy their fellow apprentice's verbal command slightly and dispersed away immediately.

Ding Busan turned towards one fat and short Snow Mountain disciple named Li Wanshan and said: "gives me your sword!"

Li Wanshan got angry and said: "good! It's for you!" he sneered at him and raised his long sword and attacked at his center, to his lower abdomen with a straight thrust.

Ding Busan's left hand reached out and at same moment his body leaned over one side and held his right wrist from the side, turned it gently and seized the

long sword from his hand, it looked like as though Li Wanshan has really given the long sword. However by the time people realized, Li Wanshan has his right wrist already dislocated and Ding Busan was flying to kick him with his foot and somersaulted back.

Other Snow Mountain disciples wanted to help one another, Ding Busan grasped the long sword but didn't rushed towards Bai Wanjian and Ding Busi, he took the sword and with it drew approximately twenty feet of circle, and stood firmly, looked coldly at the Snow Mountain sect disciples and said: "Those who step into this circle even one step, will step in to hell."

Bai Wanjian although looked calm, in his heart actually was very nervous, he knew knows for sure that if these two brothers are capable of killing even without batting an eye, if at this moment these two people collaborate, it would be similar to the event in that temple of village god when he faced the Shi Qing couple, however the circumstances here is a lot risky, Ding brothers do not resemble the Shi Qing couple, who were fastidious about the martial arts world morality and justice. He only feared that the Snow Mountain sect's all disciples will die today on this island. He thought about attacking immediately on Ding Busan and kill Ding Busan or he will kill his fellow disciples.

However although Ding Busi was injured, he was not hit on any strategic point and there was a probability that he might help Ding Busan and since he is hot tempered and strives for win anxiously, he will be ruthless.

Ding Busan called out: "Fourth brother, you draw back first and bandage your sword wound."

Ding Busi shouted: "What sword wound, where is any wound on my body. This young fellow...how can he injure me with his rotten sword?"

Ding Busan said: "Well, how on your body can I see lot of blood and a sword cut too."

Ding Busi said: "hey I was happy to play with myself, scratch myself for titillation, what's so strange about it."

Ding Busan laughed, raised the sword and said loudly: "young fellow surnamed Bai, you listen carefully, now I will fight with you alone, Ding Busi also fought you alone, so no one can say that old Ding brothers collaborated to attack you.

Fourth brother doesn't listens me still when I look at you it's not pleasing to the eyes, and must teach you a lesson. He dislikes your father, should have hit on your ears and the area around it. We are not attacking you together so do not let the other people say that Ding brother did that, passing through the realms of the rivers and lakes, it would be greatly unpleasant to hear."

Bai Wanjian thought: "you fought alone originally with me and Ding Busi fought alone, is not that two people attacking from both sides." His natural disposition was always stern, always unhappy and he struggled to make argument with others, in his heart he despised the Ding brothers; But under these two master's converging attack, also really cannot divert his attention for replies and was concentrating on the strict defense completely, and looking for a flaw in the counter-attack and so didn't uttered a word.

Fighting with his full vigor Bai Wanjian felt his arm severely shaken as his long sword came in contact with Ding Busan's long swords experiencing a strong internal energy fiercely attacking him, to escape it he swung his sword hurriedly and then returns to the his sword to traverse just in time to protect his right leg with was attacked by left palms of Ding Busi, chopping like a knife, he withdrew backward immediately two steps, and then his footsteps staggered and was nearly thrown down.

The Snow Mountain sect disciples called out: "Rest your injuries senior fellow-disciple!" With his sword raised, and the left leg just stepped into the circle which Ding Busan drew, suddenly a white light struck and the long sword passed through his chest and in a moment he was killed by Ding Busan's sword. Two more Snow Mountain disciples got angry and advanced to attack on pair.

Ding Busan gave a loud shout, leapt forward in the air, swiped the long sword from air and got down, simultaneously with his left palm to strike down, the sword fell on one of the disciple of Snow Mountain and cut him from the left shoulder to the right waist divide his body in two sections, his left hand palm strike hit another Snow mountain disciple's head. That person gave a stuffy humph sound, his head turns wearily turns toward the vest, the neck bone breaks off and he was dead at the same moment.

He killed three people in such a short time, Shi Potian after seeing it through the trees got frightened his face turned ashen.

Ding Busan didn't rest, the long sword moved like a gust of wind and sudden downpour goes to Bai Wanjian, he heard a ka-ka sound and the long sword breaks off. At the same time two people were trying to interrupt him, his sword shoot to opposite party, simultaneously cuts the head the body, two interrupt at the same time by the sword to and two people shorter by half foot.

Bai Wanjian had his right leg already injured, the move he was making were already inconvenient and had lost his long sword again, turned immediately only to find himself under attack and hit back with difficulty. Two Snowy Mountain disciples knew perfectly well that to step in to the circle is unavoidably death but cannot helplessly look at fellow apprentices struggling against these two ominous people who collaborate to kill.

Ding Busan called out: "Fourth brother, come quickly, I have already killed three people today."

Ding Busi said with a smile: "you also have to ask me to get rid of trouble." He didn't turned around, unexpectedly with his left foot springing backward, resembling like a mule kicking with his hind leg, he kicked two person on chests separately. Both Snow Mountain disciples departed several ten feet, with without even a 'humph' sound. Actually both people died the moment legs hit the chest.

Ding brothers were both menacing; the full palm executed together, attacked respectively by the vicious technique on Bai Wanjian. Bai Wanjian with a lame foot was dealing with calm, he withdrew from the circle step by step, sudden with a low humph, his left shoulder was hit by Ding Busi palms, the right arm couldn't blocked it properly.

When he saw with own eyes that Bai Wanjian is going to die shortly, Shi Potian in rush of blood called out: "you cannot kill Bai Wanjian!"

He put A'Xiu on the ground and took out the rotten saber from his belt and loudly shouted: "you could not kill people again!"

He suddenly put A'Xiu on ground so she cried: "Ahhh!

Shi Potian anxiously turned his head and said: "sorry!" and leapt up and soon stepped into the circle.

Ding Busi had not fully recovered from his previous move. Shi Potian has leapt from his top of the head, fell in front of him, precisely as A'Xiu had taught him just now. Ding Busi started to kick, suddenly called out: "the big steamed rice dumpling, is it you!"

Shi Potian said: "Yes, grandpa, fourth grandpa, you alreadyhas killed five people, now you should stop." Right away he impulsively saw Ding Busan, his heart thumping madly, saw the corpses of three Snow Mountain disciples, and also splashed a pool of blood even even under his foot .

Ding Busan said: "young idiot, that day you ran away for your life from the ship, actually you are hiding here. Why at this moment do you come out?"

Shi Potian said: "I urge you two old gentlemen to spare the enemy, since you have already won, why be so ruthless?"

Ding Busan and Ding Busi laughed at him and said: "third brother, I don't know from where this boy have listened several incomprehensible nonsense, and trying to persuade us."

Shi Potian took the long sword from ground and went to Bai Wanjian, said: "Master Bai, your Snow Mountain sect should certainly use the sword."

Bai Wanjian had lost the hope unexpectedly his young enemy Shi Zongyu came out to help him, in his heart he was uncomfortable. He threw his sword which was broken by Ding Busan and received the sword immediately, and stood motionless, with a sword in the hand, the spirit inspired.

Ding Busan scolded: "this person surnamed Bai seized you to kill, if on that day we had not rescued you, you would have been dead."

Shi Potian nods and said: "precisely. Grandpa, I am very grateful you. Therefore, I also urge Master Bai to spare and forgive."

Ding Busi feared that Shi Potian will say about his defeat on the boat, so he executed his palm moves eagerly and shouted to clear the way: "why to talk nonsense?"

He shoots the palm like a long jab, this time with Grandma Shi not on his side, he had no had scruples against him, this move 'the black cloud all over the sky ' actually he has never taught him.

Bai Wanjian was not willing that Shi Zongyu to killed; In light of this made a swift and fierce move 'old horizontal slanting', stabbing from the side. As soon as Shi Potian pulled the saber he executed the move 'the elder to fold', chopping at Ding Busi palms. It was strange but originally both moves were very ordinary but the moment they were executed simultaneously it was unexpectedly extremely powerful, Ding Busi was not able to cover instantly.

Ding Busi yelled: "careful!" But sword move was swift and fierce, although he wanted to help him, but a pair of empty-handed solid does not dare to enter in the light net weaved by the swords.

Ding Busi was surprised, critically he swayed back and forth and escapes outside the circle, whichever way he sets out, sees only an opponents sword, dancing side by side in the air like innumerable white silk, even though he withdrew, rows of beard has been cut off unexpectedly.

Ding Busi was not only surprised but also got angry, Ding Busan face changes its color, Bai Wanjian was amazed, only Shi Potian had not known that his move with internal energy was how powerful, his saber skill were so exquisite that all the three big masters were shocked greatly.

Ding Busan said: "good, we will also use weapons." From the ground picks up the long sword and called out: "fourth brother, let's flaunt your skill, take out the whip!"

Suddenly pointing the sword; he stabbed at Shi Potian.

Shi Potian has learned some martial arts but had not used in real fight so his reactions were not sharp, when he saw sword coming at him hurriedly he didn't knew what to do.

Bai Wanjian used the move "west the racing camel" to help Shi Potian from his side, this sword move reminded him and he puts forth "thousand honored pressure camels" immediately, although the saber was blunt, but coupled with his strong internal energy it was formidable move, Ding Busan sword felt stagnated, luckily Ding Busi used his Golden nine whips and Ding Busan seized the opportunity the shove his way out.

Bai Wanjian used the move "the sandstorm is luxuriant", Shi Potian used the move "the sea to sink the sand". The saber and sword coordinates flawlessly, it

seemed to be like heavy pressure of the strong winds of the yellow sand and it got down like the turbulence of an angry sea's great waves. Ding Busan and Ding Busi shouted loudly with one voice.

Shi Potian's internal energy was extremely strong and his martial-arts knowledge was also exquisite, his only shortcoming was that he had not practiced enough and didn't had the experience of fighting a enemy, when he saw the opponent making a move he didn't know how to deal with that move. He studied the Golden Phoenix saber skill and besides the last move, each move is aimed to negate the Snow Mountain sword skill, Grandma Shi also taught him each and every move of Snow Mountain sword skill and all its variations and nuances. At this moment his heart was unsettled and he was unsure but as soon as he saw Bai Wanjian making any move, he will simply put forth the corresponding move of Golden Phoenix sect.

Bai Wanjian executed the move 'old horizontal slanting' he followed it by 'the elder to fold', Bai Wanjian started the move "west the racing camel", he then made the move "thousand honored pressure camels". Although theoretically this Golden Phoenix saber skill and Snow Mountain sword skill were adversary in nature but because they just repels one another, when they are executed simultaneously in collaborative manner; they closed all the flaws of sword skill and unexpectedly produces truly magnificent set of martial-arts with infinite variation and formidable power.

Bai Wanjian was amazed at the set of saber skills used by Shi Potian, whenever his saber moved it destroyed even the hardest of the defenses, even after several moves this boy's internal energy seemed of invisible strength and looked like unceasing expanding gradually.

Ding Busi and Ding Busan also were stunned, but these two people were not willing to admit defeat, but also hoped that Shi Potian this set of strange saber skill is limited, so both brothers supported each other and fought with renewed vigor. Bai Wanjian also was concerned as Shi Potian used the move "To rule by three axes" that if he can hold or not.

At the start Ding brothers attacked suddenly hoping to take initiative but now they had lost the initiative so now they were looking to quickly find a decisive opportunity to finish the fight, however at the same time Bai Wanjian executed

the move "the dark fragrant sparse shade", his long sword vibrated with the sword light was flickering vaguely, it was actually one of the most refined move of the Snow Mountain sword skill, and it often managed to injure the opponent, Shi Potian saber also traversed and it also vibrated again and again, this move "falls in with bad company", the internal energy emanating from it from all directions.

He only heard "Ahh, Ahh" two sounds, Ding Busi shoulder was injured by the saber and Ding Busan arm was by the sword. Both people turned around swiftly and leapt outside the circle. Ding Busan held Ding Dang in his arms and rapidly ran towards the east forest. Ding Busi actually went to the west direction and from the mountain ridge transmits his loud call: "Bai Wanjian, your old man is giving face to your parents, today forgives your life, and might not forgive the next time." And sound gradually faded away.

Shi Potian saw everywhere there was blood, on the withered grass lied five corpses, the Snow Mountain sect disciple looked at him, they were shocked and sad at the same time, but also were full with suspicion.

Bai Wanjian looked suspiciously at Shi Potian, he felt all sort of emotion hate, sadness, ashamed, rejoiced, apprehensive, surprised, admiration, but also a feeling of gratitude, if not for this boy, the Snow Mountain sect would have certainly lost at least ten people on the island, he then recalled how ridiculously ruthless are the Ding brothers and still felt a lingering fear. He asked: "Who taught you this set of the saber skills?"

Shi Potian said: "Grandma Shi taught me all these saber skills, compared to your Snow Mountain sword skill these saber skill are its adversary and can defeat all your sword skills."

Bai Wanjian said: "Your saber moves are difficult adversary and can defeat out sect's sword skill. This tone is rather too big. Who is Grandma Shi?"

Shi Potian said: "Grandma Shi is the founder of My Golden Phoenix School, she is my master, and I am the eldest disciple of second generation."

Bai Wanjian was unable to restrain his anger, and coldly spoke: "you do not recognize your teacher's school, also actually in addition are throwing some random Golden Phoenix school name. Golden phoenix...what Golden Phoenix? I

have not heard the name of any such school in martial arts world."

Shi Potian didn't realize that Bai Wanjian had lost his temper so he continued to explain: "My master said that Golden Phoenix depicts sun and whenever sun comes out the snow disappears. Therefore when any Golden Phoenix disciple comes across the Snow Mountain sect's disciple, thenthen" actually originally his master said: "then they will kowtows and beg for mercy", but he was no fool and didn't said anything in front of the Snowy Mountain disciples and stopped talking immediately.

Bai Wanjian complexion paled, he said fierce: "any Golden Phoenix disciple comes across the Snow Mountain sect's disciple, then...then what?"

Shi Potian shakes his head and said: "if you these words you won't be happy, actually my master was not thinking properly when she said it."

Bai Wanjian said: "only then they will lose and flee at the mere distant sight, isn't it?"

Shi Potian said: "well something on those lines...but master Bai you should not be angry, perhaps my master was just saying it playfully, you cannot take it seriously."

The right leg and left shoulder of Bai Wanjian were injured by Ding Busi, at this time the ache was difficult to bear, however listening the words of Shi Potian he felt ashamed and raised his long sword in one swoop, called out: "good! I ask you for advice. Let me see the saber skills of the Golden Phoenix School and how it negates the sword play of Snow Mountain School!" But his shoulder was in severe pain, the color of his face changed immediately he nearly lets go his long sword.

Snow Mountain disciple Bao Wanye came forward two steps with sword in hand and said: "young fellow surnamed Shi, you don't acknowledge your own teacher's younger brother, I will receive your wise moves!"

Bai Wanjian clenches his teeth and enduring his suffering, said: "Bao Wanye, youyou" he originally wants saying that "you are no match to him", but for a person studying martial-arts, honor is the most important thing, and changed his statement immediately and said: "I will fight him!" with the sword in his left hand, said:

"Boy surnamed Shi, come on!"

Shi Potian shakes his head and said: "Your shoulder and leg is injured, we can't match our skills; right now I can certainly beat you."

Bai Wanjian said: "you have the courage to insult the Snow Mountain sect, but actually don't have the courage to compare sword skills with me!"

With his long sword he made a outstanding move called "Snow Blossom struggles the spring", the sword dazzled in the sunlight and moved towards Shi Potian's head. Although he was using his inferior left hand instead of the right hand still it was not only agile but also swift and fierce. Shi Potian saw the long sword falling overhead, had to raise his saber and executed the move "Snow Blossom meets the summer", it attacked at exactly the flaw of his opponent's move, it was precisely the nemesis of the move "Snow Blossom struggles the spring"

Bai Wanjian shivered with fear and didn't completed his move "Snow Blossom struggles the spring" and in instead hurriedly changed the move to "reckless horse climbs over mountain range", Shi Potian changed his move accordingly to the move "the Chinese gatekeeper", Bai Wanjian saw that his opponent's move were exceptional, not only they were defensively flawless, moreover also included offensive intent and were fierce in nature, he executed the move "the bright moonlight bamboo flute", Shi Potian countered with "the red date gold drum".

Bai Wanjian was startled, saw with own eyes that when his sword attacked and entered straight however Shi Potian moved his saber such that it aligned towards the weakest place of his move and he hurriedly changed his move again.

Shi Potian was still very less experienced in martial contests and was not able to plan any retaliatory moves so whenever there was any change in the opponent's move he changed his move accordingly, so no matter what move Bai Wanjian started Shi Potian will use the counter strike. He took the favorable situation and forced him three steps back.

Bai Wanjian had his leg injured and after these three steps illness was creeping in and was on the verge of admitting defeat. In a normal martial-art contest Shi Potian might fall far behind in terms of sword fighting but since the Golden

Phoenix sword skill was precisely the nemesis of Snow Mountain sword skill he was able to gain advantage.

This fight was in this sense a bit similar to the fist fight with Ding Busi in the boat when they were fighting with the opponents using only set moves.

Bai Wanjian was ashamed with himself, all the Snow Mountain disciples were watching the fight with bated breath and in between someone will shout: "lucky, lucky!"

Even after several moves Bai Wanjian was still in danger, he tried everything, no matter how complex his move is or how ingeniously it was executed Shi Potian with his clumsy style and rotten saber was able to get the upper hand. He was shocked and thought: "This young fellow was actually not boasting about his Golden Phoenix sword skill, it is indeed a very difficult adversary to our Snow Mountain sword skill. Is it possible that this Grandma Shi is my father's personal enemy and had deliberately planned and created this skill to destroy our school.

After some 30 moves Shi Potian hacked with his saber towards Bai Wanjian's left shoulder. Bai Wanjian had to fly his leg and hit the opponent's wrist to break this move but the moment he raised his right foot, a shiver of acute coldness ran through his legs and unexpectedly his right knee collapsed. Shi Potian saw that his saber was going to connect the left shoulder of Bai Wanjian. The Snow Mountain disciples called out in fear.

To every one's surprise Shi Potian broke his move and said: "This is not correct"

Bai Wanjian made effort with his left foot and jumped furiously, in his heart came a thousand thoughts suddenly like a lightening: "This boy had already won the fight and even each of his move looked inadequate, still not perfected and his style doesn't resembles much with our Snow Mountain sect. At this moment he had already won, still intentionally he let me live? That guy Shi Potian was always mean and would have needed only one opportunity to kill me or the other numerous people he had killed in past. This guy shows a kindness in heart, what's the reason...Is he seriously not Shi Potian?"

As he was thinking reflexively, his left hand long sword delivered lightly, a move called "faces upwards the potential" to stab Shi Potian. The various Snow Mountain disciples were surprised as this move "faces upwards the potential"

was not one of the Snow Mountain sword skill 72 moves.

Each disciple of Snow Mountain school has to initially cross the threshold of exercises including the physique, hardship, physical strength and others, a total of 12 different basic types, the style was common, simple and easy to record, although in exercises this martial arts was of great advantage but it cannot be used against the enemy as it was very simplistic in nature. When the people saw him put forth suddenly this move they were perplexed, and thought that senior disciple has used it because he is already too injured.

Obviously Shi Potian had never seen this move "faces upwards the potential", Grandma Shi has not taught this practice move, so he did not know how to face this move. Shi Potian hesitated slightly, Bai Wanjian long sword resembled the lightning flash, ran straight and the sword point was pointed to his Chest.

Shi Potian shouted hurriedly: "what kind of a move is this? I have not seen this?"

Bai Wanjian saw that even at this moment of life and death he is inquiring about the sword skill, he really admired his courage, said: "you have not studied this, seriously?"

Shi Potian shook the head.

Bai Wanjian said: "I can take your life this time as easy as a pie, but since when I was besieged just now by Ding Brothers, you saved me so we have now traded my life with yours, so nobody owes each other anything now. From now on, you may not probably say again that Golden Phoenix sword skill is nemesis of the Snow Mountain sword skill."

Shi Potian nodded and said: "I said that initially and after you told me not to say that again I agreed to do so. But you were the one who attacked. Master Bai, I want to understand this move of your sword skill."

Suddenly his chest shrank and a hollow of several inches appeared, in his hand the saber moved, it patted horizontally the long sword and a great amount of internal energy flowed vehemently at the sword saber junction and in a blink of eye the sword in the hand of Bai Wanjian broke in to two sections.

As soon as the sword broke Bai Wanjian left foot made a quick move, it kicked

a long sword handle on the ground and it leaped to his hand, this move 'brushes three swords' was a basic style which his school used to exercise martial-arts moves and was extremely fast.

Shi Potian looked dazzled, his hand and foot coordination was chaotic and so was his saber skills, all of sudden he was no able to grasp and it fell on the ground and at the same time the long sword struck at his chest.

Bai Wanjian's sword shake lightly. Shi Potian gave a cry and lowered his head and looked at his punctured chest. He saw his chest stabbed about six inches, the blood spurting out from chest and drenching the clothes but the wound was not as deep.

The Snow Mountain school disciple cheered with one voice: "good move of 'snowflake six'!"

Bai Wanjian said to his fellow disciples: "I bother you people to go back to inform the master of the Snow Mountain school."

He will see that this is not Shi Potian as he don't even know the basic exercise techniques of Snow Mountain and can't even fake them, even though the facial expression and manner is similar but the personality and temperament is greatly different, he thought: "he had saved my life in graciousness, a sword does not have eyes just now he could have stabbed his shoulders but he showed mercy. No matter even if he is Shi Potian he can't kill him today. This move of 'snowflake six' was only the disciplinary punishment as he was boasting about his Golden Phoenix sect and will keep it as a reminder on his body."

He dropped out the long sword and held corpse of his fellow disciple, both because of the friendship and ashamed of own incompetence, as five of his fellow died in hands of Ding brothers, cannot bear to stop his tears, other Snow Mountain juniors also hugged other four corpses. Bai Wanjian said bitterly: "Ding Busi, Ding Busan don't die early." He said to his fellow-disciples: "we walk!"

A group of people walked into the woods, no one turned his head to look at Shi Potian.

Chapter 11 - The Medicated Wine

Shi Potian could see dark red blood stains on the ground, lying around were a few broken swords, several crows croaked and flew over his head, he picked up the saber immediately and called out: "A'Xiu, A'Xiu!" He rushed to the big tree but A'Xiu was not there.

Shi Potian thought: "She might have returned." He quickly went back to the cave and called out: "A'Xiu, A'Xiu!" but she was not there, even Grandma Shi was not there. He got frightened, and then he saw on the ground several characters were written with coke. Of course he didn't understand its meaning as he was illiterate and suspected that Grandma Shi and A'Xiu had left the place.

At first he was perplexed and felt lonely on the island but then he got used to it as since his childhood most of the time he had lived alone so his heart calmed. Now his chest wound was also no longer bleeding and he thought: "Everyone has gone so I should also go and look for Grandma Shi and A'Xiu." By then his uneasiness had subsided and he was feeling a lot more relaxed. He thought about Grandma Shi and A'Xiu and unconsciously took his saber and went to the waterfront.

He saw the mighty turbulent waves, but near the shore there was no ships or any other vessels. That Azure Mist island was not really big, he walked around the island in a circle but didn't find any trace of a ships. He raised his eyes and looked in to the river but didn't saw even a sail.

As time passed he even hoped that Grandma Shi and A'Xiu will return so he came back to the cave. He ate some persimmons to appease his hunger and then rested a bit as darkness loomed in.

In the night suddenly he heard big booming noises on the riverside, then tears of ordinary cotton cloth, followed by a rush of water. Under the pale star light he saw a ship nearby the shore, but the curtain didn't moved. He was afraid that either of Ding Busi or Ding Busan might be traveling on the ship so he didn't dare to go forward, he hid behind a big tree. He heard another loud sound as a gale hit the ship, sailed got entangled but unexpectedly nobody paid any attention.

Shi Potian saw that the ship rocked again and again against the gale, curtains

fluttering. He rushed to the shore and called out: "Is there someone on the ship?" He heard no sound in reply so he took a leap and landed on the bow of the ship but cannot see anything as it was quite dark.

He entered the cabin, the moment he went inside his foot stumbled and he bumped in to someone. Someone was lying on the deck.

Shi Potian said: "Sorry!" He put out his hand to hold him and pull him up but the hands were ice-cold, the person was already dead. He was surprised and struck out with his left hand reflexively; it bumped in to icy hand of another person, that person too was dead.

His heart was thumping madly, he tried to move towards the rear side of ship, his feet landed on another corpse. He called out alarmingly: "ship...in this ship some people are?" he was exceedingly terrified and only heard his sound and nothing else.

After staggering along the ship, under the star light he saw that tens of people were lying on the deck, each one bent down stiffly and obviously all dead.

By now on the river there was a very strong autumn wind, several broken sails flapped around in the wind and made large noise. The strong breeze was blowing the ship's broken bamboo pipe and creating eerie sound. Although Shi Potian has been used to be alone and was usually bold but on this night with so many corpses and such ambience he was greatly terrified. His ears start hearing different kind of sounds.

He recalled in his mind the scene in Hou Jianji when that corpse of Wu Dao Tong clutched him nearly to suffocate, he felt goose bumps on his whole body, he wanted to leap immediately and come ashore but the ship had come far from the shore. Originally this ship fluttered afloat around the Azure Mist island, but eventually ran around in circles floated along the river downstream. He didn't dare to go in the cabin, he thought for some time and then leapt from the boat cover, grasped the mast and sat there waiting for the dawn.

The early morning sun came out, once the brightness increased then only his fear subsided, he jumped back on the deck and then saw at least 50-60 corpses inside and outside the cabin, he was alarmed as he saw that each corpse did not have a single bloodstain, also did not have any saber or sword wound. He did not

know why they died.

He circled the bow; saw in the center of the cabin door two sparkling bronze medals, approximately size of the palm of a hand. On one sign was inscribed a smiling face, kind gentle, on another sign was engraved a fierce ghost god with ominous face. He saw these two bronze medals nailed on the cabin door, appearing very strange. He gazed at the bronze medals for a moment and then saw the sign with faces and felt as if they were live and didn't dare to look at them again and turned away immediately.

He saw numerous corpses, some holding pointed weapons in their hands, some had swords in their waist; obviously these people were from the martial arts world. When he examined carefully again he saw embroidery of live wing fish with white silk on the shoulder of each person. He suspected that on this ship all these people were from same sect and somehow met a powerful enemy and all died.

That ship was suitable for the torrential river water and it went to the downstream. Around noon suddenly two surface ships rowing side by side came within the vicinity of this ship.

The helmsman of the ship saw dripping body slanting from the boat, he yelled: "pull back, pull back!"

Since no one was steering Shi Potian's ship, as soon as other ship came close to it in the river, the anxious whirl turned on lathe and his ship moved towards the surface ship and collided with a loud sound. He only heard the sounds of people shouting and scolding filthily.

Shi Potian was frightened, he deliberately considered: "this ship has already collided and damaged that incoming ship, they will inevitably come and investigate the matter and once they will see the corpses will blame me for all these deaths, how was that be good?" he was desperate and shrinks hurriedly in to the cabin, opened the deck and hid into the bilge.

By now all three ships were already entangled too badly, and then he heard some people leaping to embark the ship, and called out in alarming sound, their sound ringing in air. Some person yelled: "are these people from the flying fish sect ...help! Howhad they died?"

Also some people called out: "Lian Bangzhu 'Host of the ocean' also died here."

Suddenly some people called out: "is it really 'Commands of Rewards... and Punishments..." this person really didn't make any sound, but trembled with fear. His word had not even finished and the sound of all the people on the ship stopped all of sudden in to a twinkling silence.

Shi Potian was not able to see the look on the face of various people from the bilge, but he actually very well imagined the extreme fear and shock on their faces.

After a long time someone said: "It looks that 'command of reward and punishment' has resurfaced after a long time. Earlier in those days when 'command of reward and punishment' envoys used to roam in martial-arts world, these flying fish sect used to help them, too many evil deeds in the pastOh, things change!" he sighed and didn't said anything.

Another person asked: "Brother Hu, I have heard that 'command of reward and punishment' summons the people to the islandisland of Heroes, and gives punishment by killing them on the spot there only."

Another one said: "if the person takes orders and goes then also he dies and even if he doesn't go still he dies, whether die early or die late what's the difference. It looks that 'lord of ocean' Lian Bangzhu was not willing to receive the orders so it lead this.....that's the turn of fate."

A high-pitched voice said: "These two envoys of 'command of reward and punishment' are extremely powerful, resourceful and wicked, who in the martial-arts world can resist them?"

That Brother Hu said in reply: "Don't say that?"

That person stopped and said in low voice: "The 'command of reward and punishment' are back in the martial-arts world now each sect and schools will face difficult time ahead...it's a great misfortune. Oh!"

Shi Potian thought: "On this ship all the corpses are of flying fish sect people and there Bangzhu (master)" suddenly a thought came to his mind: "this 'command of reward and punishment' envoys are very cruel and powerful, what

will happen if they go and attack my 'Clan of eternal happiness'?"

He thought of this matter and grew impatient, he deliberately considered: "I should hurry back as soon as possible and inform master Bei that they are prepared for it."

He thought that even though the 'clan of eternal happiness' had mistaken him for their Shi Bangzhu and inadvertently brought him many troubles and endangered his life still each and every member of the sect has been respectful, prudent and courteous to him, although he had the intention to avoid them but when he heard: "each sect and society is in difficulty and it's a great misfortune", he thought about the safety of all the people of his sect and was concerned about them, so he listened attentively to the various people's discussion with rapt attention.

He heard one person saying: "Brother Hu, you said that this matter can implicate us. Can those two envoys look for our 'Iron fork society'?"

Brother Hu said: "Since these two envoys of 'command of reward and punishment' have come back again in martial-arts world whichever sect or society comes across them; it will be a disaster.....as far as this matter is concerned it's anyone's luck."

He hesitated for half of the day, said: "you pass this order quietly to everyone and immediately send someone to report this matter to the chief helmsman."

All the brothers onboard will travel with this ship. On this ship don't move anything; we will sail to the 'Red willow' harbor outside the small fishing village. The two envoys of 'command of reward and punishment' had already been on this ship and executed the flying fish sect people; it's unlikely that they will come again."

The other person said: "right, right, Brother Hu this idea is wonderful. The two envoys of 'command of reward and punishment' have already killed the 'flying fish, sect people on this ship so they have no reason to come back." then he transmitted the orders.

A lot of the people embarked on the ship. Shi Potian bent down in the bilge, and listened to various people and their discussion, their language was filled with terrified emotions and they were talking in a low voice, like a disaster is

imminent.

One person said: "our sect has not offended the island of heroes; 'command of reward and punishment' will not necessarily come after us."

Another person said: "did the flying fish dare to offend the island of heroes? As I look at the realm of rivers and lakes in these last ten years a deathly fear is permeating this time.....this time"

Also one person asked: "Lao Li, if the chief helmsman receives orders then he has to go, then what?"

That Lao Li sighed and said: "obviously won't return in that case. In the past 30 years whoever received the orders and went to the island of heroes, the master of several societies, the head of schools, has anyone came back? The chief helmsman is a person who never looked down on us. Do we covet our lives and fear for death and let this one person alone face hardships and dangers?"

Again someone said: "As far as one can avoid this danger we will avoid, fortunately we came out here in the morning and now know what the danger is, the God had blessed us and so our 'Iron fork society' can escape this misfortune. Outside that fishing village the 'Red willow harbor' is a very good hiding place, everybody hides in there, and it will be pretty difficult for two envoys to find us there."

That Brother Hu said: "In the past chief helmsman used to operate from that fishing village, so today perhaps this is the most perfect place to take refuge.....its paradise for us."

A thick bright sound said suddenly: "our 'Iron fork society' run amuck the edge of Yangtze River, we don't fear the day or we don't fear that old emperor, but as soon as we hear this damned island of heroes and envoys of 'command of reward and punishment' everybody is frightened and willing to hide in that 'red willow harbor' and fishing village.

What does it say about us? Even when we are hidden, some damned fellow will ask in the future, how will you face all those people? Even though we are inferior we can struggle and who knows I will be damned if we all had a very short life."

He said these inspiring courageous words, but in the cabin actually no one was

willing to acknowledge if word.

He thought for half a day and the that Brother Hu said: "well we all eat this river and lakes food, we put the knife in its head and lick it's blood, damn but what will you do if you see skin disease on first six soft-shelled turtles"

"Ahh, Ahh"suddenly that person with thick voice shouted miserably. Instantly, there was complete silence in the cabin.

Clattered a light sound, Shi Potian thought suddenly a drop of water struck the back of his hand, as soon as he lifted the hand his nose, he felt a fishy smell actually it was blood. The blood seeped in the bilge and fell drop by drop on him. He knew that a lot of people are on top of his head; so he didn't dare to move or create even a slight noise, whatever blood was now falling was at least not on his body.

He only heard voice of that Brother Hu saying fiercely: "you don't blame me to kill this soft-shelled turtle?"

A person trembled and said: "don't have, not to haveDon't have to! This old Wang six always spoke really rashly, also no wonder Brother Hu got angry. HoweverHowever he was originallyhe...he was always very loyal."

Brother Hu said: "then you refuse to accept my handling of this matter?"

That person said hurriedly: "no ..., It is not" his words were not even finished and he also cried pitifully, he obviously was killed by that person surnamed Hu. Then again he heard blood coming drop by drop falling into the bilge from the deck seam, luckily this time the blood didn't fell on his body directly.

That Brother Hu killed two people, said immediately: "It is not that I am cruel or merciless, I am not giving thought to the loyalty or belief of any person as right now the reality of this matter implicates several hundred brothers' lives, so as long as anyone will leak any bit of rumor about our escape, everybody will have same fate as these friends from the flying fish sect. This soft-shelled turtle old Wang six was flaunting his heroics, raised a clamor, he didn't valued his life, actually he wanted chief helmsman to go against these people and wanted everybody to accompany him to lose one's life together with him."

The people said: "yes, yes!"

That Brother Hu said: "If you all don't want to die, stay in the cabin. Little brother Ning, you steer and go to that broken sail and do not let the other people find the corpses."

Shi Potian bent down in the bilge, he heard the underwater sound of gurgle, in the cabin various people were there but no one spoke again. He didn't dare to make even a bit of sound, in his heart he thought: "what kind of place is that island of heroes?"

This 'command of reward and punishment' people send these vicious envoys for killing a ship full of people, what kind of people are these? No wonder the 'iron fork society' people are so terrified."

A long time passed, he had confused feeling between weariness and wanted to close his eyes to sleep, but thought that he might make some sound in the sleep, and if detected by those people in the cabin, then his life will be inevitably in danger, so he opened his eyes widely, and did not dare to close.

Suddenly he heard the shackling sound of the anchor, the hull was no longer moving, he assumed that they had dropped the anchor.

He heard that Brother Hu saying: "everybody will enter the house afterwards; No one should go inside now, wait calmly for the chief helmsman and listen to commands."

Various people complied with it; they put the light footsteps and talked in low voice and came ashore, and left the ship for good.

Shi Potian waited for half of the day, when he thought that all the people have entered the room then only he opened the deck. He probed from his head and looked around, he didn't saw anyone, therefore with soft hands and on tiptoe came up from the bilge, saw the cabin was still filled with the corpse, picked up sword immediately, exchanged it with his rotten saber and put it his waist.

He put out a hand in the corpse bag to get some silvers, in order to buy some food to eat; after arriving on the bow he jumped gently and came ashore, bent his back to walk fast along the sandbank and directly ran for five mile or so.

He thought that this time he had somehow escaped a very dangerous

situation, so it's better to leave as far as possible, the better, he ran full flat but fortunately this place was sparsely populated and he met no pedestrian.

In his heart he was secretly rejoiced. Actually he did not know that neighborhood actually has some peasant households, they used to provide the 'iron fork society' poison for secret killings. Some people came that way and were poisoned and died. That's why all around the country it was said that the area around the 'red willow harbor' and the fishing village is plagued with evil spirits and will create disaster, for 78 years everybody avoided this particular area, so 'iron fork society' had their secret lair in that area.

Shi Potian walked for several miles and went far away from the fishing village; he was really hungry, walked into the woods to look for a game. Fortunately the moment he went in, he heard some sound, suddenly from the long grass came out a big wild boar, it lowered its head and attacked him anxiously.

He leaned his body slightly, the right hand pulled out the sword, took advantage of opportunity and made the move 'the elder to fold' of Golden phoenix skill, and chopped down towards wild boar. That wild boar was extremely fierce, although it fell on the ground, still it ran around ten steps in forward direction before it fell on the ground and died.

In his heart he was overjoyed and thought: "Earlier when I have not studied this Golden phoenix sword skill whenever I saw the wild boar, I used to run away, now I dared to kill it."

He looked for a black flint in the hills side and lit a small fire. He then sheared all the four legs of the wild boar; washed off the bloodstain to the stream nearby, he returned to the fire and prepared it by his sword; he then roasted the boar on the twigs and branches. After some time a rich fragrance started to overflow.

As he was roasting the boar he heard voices, from about ten feet from behind.

Someone said: "good fragrant, good fragrant, my index finger is twitching, seriously!"

Another person said: "It looks someone is roasting a game, we might as well asked him to let us eat, isn't it?"

The first person replied: "precisely!" and both people strolled towards him.

He saw the two people, one was tall and powerfully built, round-faced with big ears, had put on a bronze silk gown and was grinningly affably; Other person was also tall but very thin, he wore a extravagant sky blue long unlined close-fitting gown, his body width was even one can say half of the other person and had a gloomy face. As soon as that fat person saw Shi Potian he smiled, and said: "little brothers, your this"

Shi Potian had already heard these two people talking on the road, he said: " I have a lot of wild pork here, even ten people can not finish it, although you two can help me out then."

That fat person said with a smile: "we are so impolite."

Then both people sat in a circle around the fire, in the light of flame Shi Potian saw that although the clothing of both people was magnificent and expensive, but now it was dirty, full of wrinkles, and splashed with bloodstains. Their face flashed with look of surprise as they looked at the firewood pile. The wild boar's fat melted and big drops of it fell into the fire, and a very light fragrance arose, although they had not expected at arrival but it looked amazingly good.

That thin person took out a blue color bottle gourd from the waist, pulled out the plug, and after drinking said: "nice wine!"

That fat person also took out a red bottle gourd from the waist, pulled out the plug to drink one, said: "nice wine!"

Shi Potian used to often drink wine with Xie Yanke, at this moment when he smelled the fragrant liquor he also wanted to drink wine, but he saw these two people drinking alone and saying 'good wine' but not inviting him. In his life he never begged or asked anyone for something that's why he swallowed the saliva and didn't ask for the wine. He thought that even without the wine he will live and said: "It's cooked, please eat!"

Both fat and thin people put out their hand and snatched a large piece of ham respectively, took it, opened their mouth and were just about to nip, then Shi Potian said with a smile: "although those two pieces are big but actually are the hind legs of boar, its taste is not as good as the front two leg's."

That fat person said with a smile: "Little brother has a good conscience."

He exchanged it with the foreleg and ate it. That thin person had already nipped at the hind leg so he hesitated and then didn't exchange. Both people ate, drank and every now and then approvingly said: "nice wine!" They then put plug and hanged the bottle gourd to his their waist.

Shi Potian thought: "these two people are stingy, they drank their own wine and didn't even ask me, is this wine really that precious?" He then approached that fat person and said: "Sir; is that wine in your bottle gourd really that good? I think I'll also like to taste it."

Although he didn't want to beg for something so he said it in such a way as if he was discussing about the wine.

That fat person shook his head and said: "no, no...this is not wine, don't drink it. We have eaten your wild ham; we should give you some other gift as courtesy."

Shi Potian says with a smile: "you are deceiving me; you said obviously a moment ago 'nice wine' and even I can smell this fragrant wine." He turned his head and said to the thin person: "Sir; is that wine in your bottle gourd?"

Both eyes of that thin person turned white, he said: "this is a poison, do you have the courage then to drink it."

As he was saying these words he loosened his bottle gourd and put it on the ground.

Shi Potian said with a smile: "if its poison, how is that you didn't die?"

He took the bottle gourd and pulled out the plug, smelled the fragrant wine.

That fat person's complexion changes suddenly, he said: "who is deceiving you? Please keep that down quickly!" He stretched out his five fingers to grasp his right wrist to seize the hand and take the bottle gourd, the moment his fingers touched his wrist he felt a strong internal energy and immediately pulled his hands back.

That fat person was startled, "Hey" he said: "so that's how it is, we actually failed to see from our eyes. Please drink!"

Shi Potian lifted the bottle gourd; he took a big mouthful thinking that this thin person treasures this liquor, and did not dare to drink, and then plugged the wooden cork, and said: "many thanks!"

Instantly, ice-cold cold air rose straight from his pubic region. This cold air was just like an ice line inside his body, shortly he felt as his whole body was frozen stiff, his whole body shivered severely and cold was extremely difficult to bear, he moved his internal energy hurriedly against ice line and then gradually it melted. Soon he felt an unbelievable amount of pleasure in all his limbs and bones and felt comfort and enjoyed the moment.

He no longer felt any cold, instead warmth spread inside his body, he approves loudly and said: "nice wine!" He cannot bear put the bottle gourd down, pulled out the wooden cork, and drank again, and used his internal energy to melt the ice and felt more drunk and said: "Seriously, I have not drank such good wine ever, what a pity this wine is too expensive, otherwise I would have clean this out."

Both people were flabbergasted and had surprised expression on their face.

That fat person said: "little brother, if you really liked it that much, then you can drink this whole bottle gourd."

Shi Potian said with extreme pleasure: "seriously? If uncle is ready to give up, it's my pleasure."

That thin person coldly gazed towards him and said: "this uncle's red bottle gourd's poisoned wine is even better then mine, you must try?"

Shi Potian looked at the fat person with a look that he wants to try.

That fat person said: "At this small age, and such internal strength, is it not too early to lose one's life, what a pity?" At the same time he started to loosen his red bottle gourd and put it on the ground.

Shi Potian thought: "these two people like joking, if it is really poisoned wine, how can they drink?" He quickly took that red bottle gourd, and pulled out the plug, he smelt a wonderful fragrance and drank it. This time wine was actually like a group of raging fire and started to burn immediately in his lower abdomen.

He yelled 'Ahh...', then jumped and at the same time moved his strong internal

energy towards that area, only then the raging fire extinguished, he called out: "good strong wine."

Strangely, the moment he said that; all the steam in his abdomen disappeared and he felt incomparable pleasure in his whole body.

That fat person said: "your internal energy is so strong, you actually managed to drink wine from both bottle gourds, actually how?"

Shi Potian said with a smile: "I drank, but not all of it. We three people met today, have formed the friendship, everybody drank wine, ate a meat, how interesting? Uncle you are invited." As he was saying, he passed the bottle gourd.

That fat person says with a smile: "Little brother is stretching my limit; I might not be a gentleman after this one!" He received the bottle gourd to drink once and again gave it to Shi Potian and said: "you drink again!"

Shi Potian after drinking passed it to the thin person and said: "Uncle, please drink!"

Suddenly thin person's complexion changed, he said: "I drink my own wine." He took up his blue bottle gourd to drink and gave it to Shi Potian.

Shi Potian received it and drank took a mouthful and felt perplexed. Drinking the ice wine after drinking from red wine gourd; and again ice liquor the taste was even better. When he saw all the four eyes staring at him immediately understood and said with a smile apologetically: "sorry, I drank too much this time."

That thin person coldly gazed at him and said: "you boast a lot for a real man, and even have a bigger mouth."

Shi Potian says with a smile: "if everyone doesn't drink until one is full, then we will go to a nearby town, I have money here with me, and will drink there. Is this only a good wine." As he was saying he drunk again from the red bottle gourd and gives it back to the fat person.

That fat person sat cross-legged, secretly using his internal energy to drink more wine. He saw Shi Potian calmly sitting and drinking both wine and was greatly surprised.

The fat and the thin both people looked at each other in blank dismay. They both were martial-arts masters who practiced exactly opposite type of martial-arts.

That fat person practiced the yang type of martial-arts, powerful, positive and sturdy in whereas that thin person practiced the yin type of martial-arts, soft, flexible and fast in nature.

In the bottle gourd of both people was a medicated wine which they used as an auxiliary to improve their internal strength. In the red bottle gourd was the dry and extremely hot drug 'red raging inferno'; when put in with wine it turns in to extremely strong and toxic wine".

In the blue color bottle gourd was a very strong coolant drug mixed with the wine and then it was further mixed with '99 pills'. These '99 pills' were made of hundreds of different types of poisonous and medicinal herbs whereas 'red raging inferno' wine was in addition made of the gall bladder of red peacock and crane that is why it was also fatally poisonous.

These two people were using these medicated wines for years and were used to it. But both these wines were so fierce that an average man needs only to put a drop of any wine of these on the tip of tongue and by the time they would have licked it; they would be on ground, dead.

Both of these have a very high internal strength, and both were taking these poisonous wines for a long time as medicine still they have to count there drinks and didn't dare to take it in excess. If the fat person drinks the cold liquor by mistake or the thin person takes the 'red raging inferno' wine both would have died very painfully there only. So when these two people saw with their own eyes that Shi Potian was drinking both wines and still was acting as though nothing has happened were amazed, even to say that is an understatement.

Although both of these were very experienced in the martial-arts realm and knew several masters but how could have they known about Shi Potian. He had gone through such an irony of fate that even if he told them they won't believe.

Initially he practiced the pure 'yin' martial-arts for about ten lunar months and thus had 'yin' type of internal strength first, after that he practiced the 'yang' martial-arts so had then 'yang' type internal strength, and eventually managed

to have two type of internal energy streams in his body both the 'yin' and 'yang' type.

Although these two type of energy streams could have been detrimental to him and the fire deviation could have actually caused his death but accidentally his energy was discharged at the crucial moment. Furthermore he also practiced the 'Arhat's Divine Demon-Subduing Skill' so he had immense internal energy base.

He also drank a rare medicated wine of Ding Busan which helped to increase his resistance against any poison but also increase his internal energy. So even though both wines were highly toxic still he was impervious to any harmful effect of both the 'red raging inferno' wine and great cold toxicant.

Shi Potian drank the good wine which two people brought, under his heart he felt sorry, so he gain roasted some more wild pork, they all ate the grilled meat but even after Shi Potian's persuasions both of them didn't drank further.

That two people only said that if he wants to drink the poisoned wine to test his internal energy and didn't want to admit defeat then please go on, so he took out bottle gourd again and drank. Both people looked at him steady gaze, saw that despite drinking so much still he was showing no sign of any poison or drug, thought that this is really rare, where is this young hero coming from?

After that the fat person went to Shi Potian and took back his red bottle gourd; put out a hand to greet and said: "Little brother's internal energy is really admirable. Can I ask the little brother his honored name?"

Shi Potian wrinkled his brow, and said: "this is matter which gives me most of my headache, as soon as others see me the first thing they do is to ask my name. Actually my surname is not Potian (stone) and I am kind of nameless therefore it's really difficult to answer you."

That fat person thought: "this boy is deceiving me actually don't want to tell his name." He asked: "then little brother who is your respected teacher? What school you belong to?"

Shi Potian said: "my master is Grandma Shi, have you seen her? She is the master of the Golden Phoenix School and I am eldest disciple of the second generation."

Both people thought: "He is talking nonsense; we know all the schools in the martial-art realm. What is this Golden Phoenix sect. who is this Grandma Shi? This boy is dodging our questions."

That fat person didn't drink and handed back the bottle gourd, said: "So little brother is actually the Golden Phoenix sect's eldest disciple, no wonder he drank from both the bottle gourds."

Shi Potian saw that he had not drunk, thought: "he forgot to drink while speaking to me." So he said: "you have not drunk."

The face that fat person turned a bit red, said: "Really?"

In his heart he thought that if he drank more he might injure his own body so he didn't drink but it looks that this young fellow has seen through my trick, he got angry for a moment but felt ashamed when he realized that Shi Potian was asking with good intention in his heart.

That fat person had earlier drank twice, altogether he had drunk eight times, already the over the quantity he was used to. So he pretended to drink again, he raised the bottle gourd to his mouth but closed down his teeth tightly, made a sound from his throat as though he was drinking; the medicated wine went back in to the bottle gourd.

This way that fat person managed to show off he was drinking but how could have he deceived the thin person? The thin person also imitated the fat one and pretended that he was drinking with his blue bottle gourd but no wine entered the throat.

Initially each bottle gourd was filled with around eighth part drugs and two part wine however Shi Potian drank most of the wine from both bottle gourds. His alcohol capacity was originally not really great and although he had immense internal energy and overall it increased his resistance and totally neutralized the poisonous drugs but still he was not able to handle the alcohol completely and started speaking slowly and unintelligible.

He started to say: "where is A'Xiu, where is Dingding Dangdang. Both people heard him but were not able to make out what exactly is he speaking.

That thin person deliberately considered: "this young fellow has shown

extraordinary talent and handled us admirably. He maintained composure but now is talking nonsense, it looks he is really sinister and insidious. He only feared that this person was just faking drunkenness and if they try to deal with him with martial-arts it can be dangerous for them.

The fat person thought in his heart: "today we two people are against a single person still this young person's internal energy is very strong and rarely heard of. We should wait for him to drink even the rest of wine and let us see if can resist it." He then signaled with his eyes to that thin person.

That thin person understood his wink and nodded back, he put his hand innocuously in his bosom and took out a pill, actually it was the "99 pills" drug in his hand and when Shi Potian handed him back his blue bottle gourd, he pretended to drink, puts out his hand to wipe the saliva from mouth of bottle gourd and secretly put "99 pill" in it, slowly swings the bottle gourd and said: "nice wine, nice wine!"

When the thin person was doing so that fat person also put "red raging inferno" drug from his bosom and mixed in to the wine.

Shi Potian only thought that he has met two generous straightforward people. He drank wine and ate meat in excess and gradually he was feeling a bit tipsy so didn't realize they were giving his highly toxic wine.

He only heard that thin person saying: "little brothers, there isn't much left in both these bottle gourds, your alcohol capacity is really good, drink up!"

Shi Potian said with a smile: "good! Your two are straightforward people, I am the impolite one."

He took up the bottle gourd and was just about to drink, he remembered an incident suddenly, he said: "on the long river boat, I once heard Ding dang saying that man and woman, if are perfectly suited to each other, they will tie the knots and become husband and wife, if there is good friendship between one man and another then they swear brotherhood. Its rare thing that I met you two esteemed people, why don't we swear brotherhood and be brothers, later will drink the rest of wine, what do you two think?"

Both these people said: "Good". They both said that it is a very good idea and started toasting the wine saying: "for your health!"

Shi Potian was already feeling tipsy and didn't understand much of the big talk but still started to speak freely.

That fat person listened to him talking affectionately and thought it's an irony we are trying to kill him and he is speaking so. He thought that he should attack Shi Potian when he had already taken the wine this way he have to use his internal energy to suppress the poison and won't be able to defend himself. Although this act was not really frank and upright, but it looked like this youth was really dangerous, and they both couldn't compete with this person directly.

They feared that he might not drink the medicated wine, so anxiously said: "very good, very good, well said. Now you have to finish both the bottle gourds."

Shi Potian said to that thin person showing the bottle gourd: "Sir, how about you?"

That thin person said: "I would have really loved too..." he coughed and the said: little brother, thanks for the kindness please go ahead."

Shi Potian was already feeling drunk and his vision was also now kind of blurry still he drank up the wine from blue bottle, he was having some serious trouble to suppress the cold emanated from the wine.

At the same time that fat person clapped and said: "nice wine capacity, nice wine capacity! In this bottle gourd also there is some wine left, little brother, finish this off then we are sworn brothers."

Shi Potian took the red bottle gourd with interest, didn't think at all and drank in one breath.

Both people looked towards him and thought: "we made this medicated wine with '99 pill' and 'red raging inferno', we normally mix one pill with at least six bottle gourd wine and then drink that bottle gourd wine for one month, so that we can exercise our internal energy daily and thus it is harmless.

However if we mix this '99 pill' with 'red raging inferno' then it is equal to at least twelve bottle gourds of medicated wine. It was enough for these people for at least half a year so literarily he was drinking their half year quota of medicated wine, if he could still handle it than there can't be any justification for sure."

Suddenly they heard Shi Potian crying in extreme agony: "oh, notIt is not

good, there is extreme pain in my belly."

He held his belly to bend the waist. As soon as both people saw that they looked at each other and smiled.

That fat said with a smile: "how? Belly pain? It looks that you have eaten a lot of this pork."

Shi Potian said: "is not, oh, it is not good!" he cried, suddenly leapt about ten feet in the air.

Both people stood up and thought that at this moment he is facing death, if we strike one final swift and furious blow simultaneously than surely we will be able to get rid of this person.

Unexpectedly Shi Potian struck with his palm at the big tree, called out: "ouch, II might die with this pain!"

His abdomen felt unbearable pain and he twisted and turned, he moved his internal energy immediately to his abdominal region; these drugs '99 pills' and 'red raging inferno' were highly toxic in nature and when given in such large quantity and together was no small matter; the toxic outbreak came on, he felt such pain that he was close to fainting, he whole body started to twitch and then he started convulsing with cramp forming in his arms and legs.

This strange pain was really hard to endure, he again shot out his left hand fist and struck a big tree, after having struck this fist, the abdominal pain reduced slightly, he immediately stuck out his right hand also. It only shook the big tree branches and leaves it in chaotic dance. He again hit with his fist palms, the abdominal pain reduced a bit, but in a short time he felt as though ten thousand steel knives have simultaneously sheared his stomach.

He constantly was yelling "Aaah...aah!"

He constantly was yelling "Aaah...aah!" His hands and feet moved in a chaotic dance sometimes he move his arms as in sword moves, and then some fist moves.

Actually unconsciously his arm and leg movement closely resembled the martial-arts moves he had seen or learnt earlier. He had not studied proficiently and at this time he felt as though someone was twisting knives in his abdomen,

his brain was in total confusion, so obviously he was not thinking about any strategic move; he was trying to distract himself from his pain and randomly throwing different kind of moves.

Although these moves were random and didn't followed any sequence but accompanied by his strong internal energy and power were really fierce. He felt strange that every time he hit with his palm or leg the pain subsided a bit so he started to move more quickly.

Both people looked at each other in blank dismay and gradually drew backwards. They thought that this person has so much poison in their body and at the point of death has started executing all his skills in desperation.

He is just like a brave fighter who went crazy and if somehow grasps another person it will be very difficult to escape.

They saw his fist exuding a hu-hu sound, the style looked similar to the snow mountain sword sect, and also looked like Ding family's seizing techniques, it also had some unique style of sword skills but they had not seen it before. They thought is it really possible that this person is some Golden phoenix school disciple.

Although these moves of Shi Potian were strange and ungraceful but were extremely ferocious in nature. As he made another strange vertical move it sent out a gentle breeze, both of these were inwardly amazed to see his skills.

As he started to execute his moves quickly, the breeze also unexpectedly started to get more and more swift and fierce, two people as if by prior agreement looked each other, showed a faint smile, thought: "although this boy's internal energy is good but his martial art is not that great, even if we have not used '99 pills' and the 'red raging inferno' still this person couldn't have rivaled us.

Earlier as they saw his internal energy they thought that his martial arts will be even better."

As soon as such thought came they cannot help but pity themselves that they had wasted the pot of medicated wine and that pill, only if they had known they would not have resorted to this underhand method and could have saved that precious drugs.

Both poisons were actually of 'yin' and 'yang' kind; that means that of opposite properties, because of this after sometime they start to neutralize each other.

Also originally Shi Potian had practiced the "arhat's divine demon subduing skill". If he had only drank that fat person's 'red raging inferno' wine or that thin person's cold medicated wine, he would have died because of the enormous quantity only, even though he has strong internal strength.

These two people use exactly opposite kind of poison and both were extremely strong in nature too. However they had no idea that both the poison will cancel out each other.

Xie Yanke had already tried to kill Shi Potian using 'yin' and 'yang' opposite energy streams and fortunately once he was injured he had learnt the "arhat's divine demon subduing skill" and his resistance had increased a lot so he was able to hold out the initial outburst of the poison.

Shi Potian said after some time: "It's not as painful now!"

He put out his hand at the fire of high-piled firewood to take one piece of roasted pork, under the flame he saw his right palm had a red spot of the size of a copper coin, nearby that red spot were revolving innumerable blue color specks."

He said: "thisWhat is this?"

Then he looked at his left palm and saw a similar spot their too. He himself didn't knew that his internal energy was not able to sublimate the poison directly so it forced it from his abdominal region to his palms and finally both of these poisons neutralized themselves.

When both these people saw it they understood the reason, they cannot help to think in their heart: "this boy's internal energy is so strong that it forced such powerful drugs from his abdomen to palm, it's unbelievable. Either such immense internal strength of this young person is natural or accidentally he has taken some kind of a rare herb like 'immortal lingzhi mushroom'; no wonder his internal energy is so strong.

They earlier concluded that this person had evil intension that's why they gave

him poisonous drug but when they saw that he only struck against the big trees and even after recovering from such painful abdominal pain he was not looking at them with even slight hostility they understood that it was only a misunderstanding because of the way this dumb kid has behaved.

Both felt compunction in their heart and were ashamed of them to use such underhand tactics against an honest and straightforward person. They felt as though they have lost their identity as a martial-art master.

Then they heard Shi Potian saying: "we said a moment ago that we are sworn brothers now but don't know which one of you is older? I don't even know your honored name?"

Both these people originally said so that Shi Potian can drink that the poisonous wine and thought that he will die immediately, so thoughtlessly consented to swear brotherhood with him, even in their wildest thought they had not expected that he will survive. These two people were usually proud; once the word leaves their mouth as a true martial-art master will never go back on their words. Although they were no willing to swear brotherhood with this dumb kid, but were also not willing to break a promise.

That fat person coughed and said: "I am called Zhang San, as far age is concerned this Brother Li Si is older then me. Little brother, you are nameless and don't have a surname, how can we swear brotherhood with you?"

Shi Potian said: "my original name is not pleasant to hear, my master has given me a name Shi Yidao, and you can call me with this name as well."

That fat person said with a smile: "then we three people today will pay respect to each other and will swear brotherhood."

He then knelt on a single knee and said in clear and resonant voice: "Zhang San, Li Si and Shi Yidao, today swear brotherhood and hereafter have the same luck, shares sorrows and happiness; if Zhang San disobeys this word then he should be cut open like this wild boar, killed by humans, roasted and eaten, ha, ha!"

This name Zhang San was definitely a fictitious name. He kept on proclaiming Zhang San every time and never used the word "I" so he swore just to show off.

That thin person also knelt and said with a smile: "Li Si, Zhang San and Shi Yidao today become sworn brothers and are willing to die on the same month same date and in the same year, if disobeys this oath, Li Si should die a very violent death with knives gutting his intestines Ha ha ha." He also sneered repeatedly to show his deceit.

Shi Potian did not know that Zhang San and Li Si are general terms used; neither did he perceived there facial expression as false, he knelt down and sincerely said: "I, brother Zhang San and brother Li Si are sworn brothers from today onwards, If we have nice wine and good meat then I'll let these two elder brothers to eat first, if some people must

attack these two elder brothers then I will resist first.

If I had said these words and did not keep my promise then God punish me daily with the stomach pain like I had a moment ago."

When both people listened to him to say such words sincerely, they cannot help but felt qualms of conscience.

That fat person stood up, said: "Third younger brother, we two people have some important matter to attend, we bid good-bye."

Shi Potian said: "Elder brothers, is it really important to go now? Eldest brother just said that once we are sworn brothers, we share sorrow and happiness and I'll be fortunate to share. In any case, it's fine with me, Is it fine if I too go along with you two elder brothers?"

As soon as that fat person heard it he smiled and said: "we are not going for a dinner and it's no matter of amusement; so you need not to go." He said with arrogance.

Shi Potian has got friends for the first time in his life, he never had a friend, today when he met these two and became sworn brothers, he was extremely pleased and didn't want them to depart.

He said: "I'll accompany the two elder brothers to whichever road they follow. I don't know when I will see you both brothers again and whether I will get the opportunity to eat meat and drink wine again with you two."

That thin person Li Si kept the gloomy face and completely ignored Shi Potian

however that fat person Zhang San was more open minded, he pulled him aside and said: "brother, you said that your master had given you this name Shi Yidao so what is your real name. Now that we are sworn brothers we shouldn't have any secret between us?"

As soon as Shi Potian heard it he gave an awkward smile and said: "I'm not hiding the truth from elder brother but actually my real name is too coarse and not that good to listen. My mother used to call me bastard."

Zhang San laughed and said: "bastard, bastard...this name is really strange."

Then Zhang San and Li Si started to move, although it looked that they were walking normally but their speed was really swift and with in a moment they used their lightness martial art and looked like a blur passing through the trees.

In a moment Shi Potian fell behind about tens of feet from both of them, he too leapt hurriedly and pursued them. After some time he caught them and as only at about three paces from those two.

Li Si and Zhang San were eager to get rid of this dumb kid, so they used their lightness martial-art; however Shi Potian was still following them closely.

They only heard Shi Potian saying: "Elder brothers are really good, you two can effortlessly walk so quickly and here I'm running desperately still somehow only managed to keep the pace."

Speaking of posture with which they were walking, there was a great difference. Zhang San and Li Si were walking naturally and in a graceful manner on the other hand Shi Potian was actually running in strides, both his arms crazily moving like pendulum, his body bent like a bow as though he was running for his life.

When these people heard him running after them happily and still talking with no ill intension, they can't help but to admire his unyielding spirit.

Shi Potian saw these two people moving along the same road he came and they were going towards the same fishing village where 'Iron fork sect' people were hiding.

As they went near to that place he said loudly: "elder brothers, in front of us on this road is a very dangerous place and could be disastrous. If we change our

way than we can avoid losing out life."

Li Si and Zhang San both paused and tuned around and asked together: "how do you know this is a dangerous place?"

Shi Potian also paused, said: "In front of us is the 'red willow' harbor and a fishing village. Many rivers and lakes people who want to avoid their pursuers come here and hide. If they saw us three people then they might attack and kill us."

Li Si gazed him coldly and said: "how do you know?"

Shi Potian told them how he entered the ship full of corpse, how he heard the 'Iron fork sect' people hiding in bilge and briefly about their discussion.

Li Si said: "These people are hiding in the fishing village themselves from the 'command of reward and punishment', what can they do to us? Your fear is totally unwanted and irrelevant.

Shi Potian said: "No, no! These people are really ferocious and often kill people. They fear that someone will divulge their secret and have even killed people on their own side. You look, these body bloodstain, it is from the two people they have from their own sect, just look at the blood drop on my clothing, I hid under the deck in the bilge at that time, and even I didn't dared to move."

Li Si said: "you are already afraid, you are with us...you shouldn't be afraid!"

Shi Potian said: "Elder brothers please do not go there; thisThis is not joke."

Li Si turned and Zhang San turned around and lead the way without consulting with each other and thought: "This kid has such an immense internal energy but not only is his martial-arts ordinary but he is also really timid like mouse".

They started moving counting ten feet at a time. Shi Potian took half steps but still followed them closely.

Zhang San said: "you are afraid that 'Iron fork sect' people might kill so what are you doing now, following us closely?"

Shi Potian said: "have we not taken an oath? We have to share sorrow and happiness. If you two elder brothers have to go surely, then we will die on the

same month, same date, in the same year with you. Once a man real man had said the words, he has no alternative but to keep a promise."

Li Si said gloomily: "heh...heh, the 'Iron fork sect' has several dozens men there, even if all of them stab you once; you will become a big hedgehog, you are not afraid?"

Shi Potian remembered how he heard on the ship the miserable cry of people killed by 'Iron fork sect', at this moment he felt afraid. At present in that small fishing village at least 100-200 people were hiding, even though the martial-arts of both elder brothers is very good still surely they will be overwhelmed by sheer number.

Li Si saw his face changing its color, he sneered and said: "we seek our death voluntarily; we don't need anyone to accompany us to death. Little brother, you go home. If this time we don't die then we will meet ten years later."

Shi Potian waved his hand saying: "you elder brothers should take as many helpers as you can. We are small in numbers and at the critical situation if we can escape and save our lives than we should."

Li Si frowned and said: "hit and then run away, what kind of a real man does that? How can we disgrace ourselves?"

Shi Potian said: "good, then I too won't run away."

Zhang San and Li Si were not able to get rid of him, they looked at each smiled and thought in their: "This dumb kid actually very loyal, even agreed to go with us in such dangerous situation.

He is by far more heroic than all the other so called heroes of the martial arts world."

Chapter 12 - Two Bronze Medals

Shi Potian saw no trace of that ship full of corpses. In the village he saw no one and it was unexpectedly very quiet, he walked one step, his heart thumping, his complexion was already pale, thought aloud: "Fortunately they are all hiding and hadn't seen us."

Zhang San and Li Si surveyed the terrain and arrived at a small thatched hut, Zhang San puts out a hand to shove open the wooden shutter of shop. He arrived near a stove without consulting anybody, looked around and slightly hesitated, held one big stone water cylinder and placed it aside, the cylinder bottom revealed a big iron hoop. Li Si held the iron hoop and raised it upwards with a creaking sound; a sheet of iron slid smoothly and appeared a big hole suddenly.

Zhang San leapt inside it following Li Si who jumped down first. Shi Potian only looked at them with admiration, and thought that this path might lead us to the hideout of 'Iron fork sect' and anxiously said: "two elder brothers, under this hole there may be"

These words were not even said and he didn't see either Zhang San or Li Si so he too didn't think much and jumped in.

In front of him was a narrow corridor, Shi Potian followed after both people anxiously, only after few steps, he heard some people drinking and suddenly said: "what?"

Shi Potian felt a strong breeze moving towards Zhang San. Actually it was accompanied by an iron fork which someone moved towards him to stab. Zhang San used his both hands and hit the iron fork to reverse the attack; the two people attacking him fell to ground and died in a single move.

The corridor walls were ignited with large butter candle, he goes out about ten feet, then made a turn, at each corner there were two men guards.

Whenever Zhang San saw them he only waved his hand and grasped the iron fork and killed them on the spot got rid of them quickly and neatly, not even using a second move.

Shi Potian was very surprised to see such martial-art, he thought: "what Brother Zhang is using is magic martial-arts? This is martial-art is really unexpected, maybe he is even better than Grandpa Ding Busi, Ding Busan or even Master Bai."

He absent-mindedly followed both these people as he heard confused sound of a lot of people. Suddenly he felt a large dash of energy moving towards them. Zhang San and Li Si were still moving in a very casual way and show no concern. All the people facing them suddenly stood firm with a panic-stricken color on their face.

Zhang San said: "Is chief helmsman in here?"

A person with huge stature held his fist in the other hand and said: "I Yu Desheng am the chief of 'Iron fork sect'. You two honorable people came and I apologize I missed you and have not greeted you earlier.

Please come to the hall and we can have some wine. Oh...there is also another honored guest; all three of you please honor me with your presence.

Zhang San and Li Si nodded. Shi Potian saw this strange scene and didn't understand anything. Zhang San has killed twelve people of 'Iron fork sect' in one breath and unexpectedly the opposite party was willing to give up, he thought its not possible and only wanted to turn around to escape, however when he saw Zhang San and Li Si carelessly moving towards the hall he can't withdraw now and followed them, but actually could not help his whole body to tremble.

The chief helmsman of 'Iron fork sect' acted in a very respectful manner, showing them the way, nearby the road was filled with numerous people of 'Iron fork sect', everyone holding a iron fork with sparkling edges in their hands.

Zhang San, Li Si and Shi Potian passed between two row of audiences, only made a turn, and suddenly were present in a brightly lit hall, on the wall were inserted innumerable flares, and it looked as though it was daytime in their.

All around that place were again numerous 'Iron fork sect' people. Shi Potian saw these people and visualized them cutting his throat, got afraid and turned his head hurriedly, didn't dare to look again.

Yu Desheng invited both Zhang San and Li Si to take the centre seat. These two people didn't decline and sat without consulting anybody.

Zhang San smiled and referring to the seat on his side said "Little brother, you sit in here."

After Shi Potian took his seat, Yu Desheng also took his seat.

After some time several people wearing blue gown, having no belt or weapon and who looked like a part of some religious sect, arrived carrying in the cup, chopsticks, food and wine. As soon as they departed Zhang San and Li Si put their left hand in their tunic and from their gown sleeve simultaneously departs a thing, it fell on the table in front You Desheng.

They were actually two sheets of bronze and the way it was thrown it inserted on the tabletop smoothly exactly as though it is a part of table and resembling a fine piece of workmanship. On each piece was inscribed a person's face, one a smiling face and the other angry gloomy face.

These bronze medals were exactly similar to the one nailed on the cabin door of the ship which had corpses of 'flying fish sect' people.

Wu Desheng's complexion changed as he stands up, all around reverberated big 'lang' 'lang' sounds as hundreds of men vibrated their iron fork and exuded an ear-spitting sound, as various people have moved one step.

Shi Potian cried: "oh!"

He anxiously stood up so that he could flee and thought: "We are in this main hall, now it's not easy to escape."

He looked at Zhang San and Li Si, one was grinning and the other had a mystifying look but still both maintained their composure, Shi Potian had no alternative so he simply sat down.

Yu Desheng said: "Is it so, or do you have something to say too?"

Zhang San said with a smile: "Chief helmsman Yu, you are the Shanxi 'crouching tiger gate' only disciple; in present age your 'double short fork' martial-arts is incomparable.

We are here to invite you to the island of heroes to eat a bowl of 'eight meat

gruel'. We don't have any other intension and please don't look over it suspiciously."

Yu Desheng hesitated for a moment, put out a hand on the table and the two bronze medals jumped, caught it and put in the bosom, said: "I accept the invitation for 'eight meat gruel'."

Zhang San gave thumbs up sign and said: "many thanks Chief helmsman Yu, me and my brother didn't came here on a futile pursuit."

From the crowd suddenly one man called out: "Although Chief helmsman Yu is our head but still our 'Iron fork sect' has numerous heroes who are not afraid to die. We cannot let the Chief helmsman to lose his life for us brothers."

As soon as Shi Potian heard this sound, he recognized him as that Brother Hu who killed two people in the cabin on that ship; he knew that this person is very fierce in nature and got afraid, his heart thumping madly.

Yu Desheng forced a smile and said: "give more lives in vain, what's the gain? I have already decided; Brother Hu, no need to talk too much." As he was speaking this he took the wine pot and poured for Zhang San, but the right hand was trembling and he spilled the wine on the tabletop.

Zhang San said with a smile: "Chief helmsman Yu Desheng is a big hero, you have killed s many without batting an eye, are you a little afraid today?"

He took the wine glass to his mouth nearby, with a ping pong sound, the wine glass fell suddenly in ground and broke in to pieces, and his body leaned on one side on chair.

Shi Potian said: "eldest brother, how?"

He leaned to other side and asked Li Si: "elder brother, heHe"

His words were not even finished and he saw Li Si leaning on the chair slowly. Shi Potian was frightened and felt helpless for a while.

In the beginning Yu Desheng thought that Zhang San and Li Si are doing this intentionally, but then he saw Zhang San face having a blood red color, breathing as though he have asthma, on the other hand Li Si had actually turned white, on his face appeared faint purplish black color, obviously they were

severely poisoned.

Under his heart he felt great happiness but actually didn't dare to take any action, he said with hypocrisy: "you two...what?"

He saw Li Si shrank to the bottom of the table and not even twitching now.

Shi Potian was busy helping out Li Si, he asked: "two elder brothers, youYouare you feeling uncomfortable?"

He didn't know that when he, Zhang San and Li Si were drinking wine it was actually poisonous wine and they had taken around eight-nine mouthful. By their skill if they normally used to drink three mouthfuls and quickly move their internal energy to neutralize the poison and face no problem.

But this time even though they faked and still were reluctant to show off at the first they drank more than they could have handled. Also even though they were used to this medicated wine but they didn't feel any abdominal pain because they had taken antidote earlier.

Actually the purpose of the antidote was to postpone the break-out of poison inside their stomach. This poisonous wine they were taking was for increasing their internal energy so this antidote didn't neutralized the poisonous nature but only negated it to act for a limited amount of time and waits for the internal energy to sublimate the poison.

This way antidote acts only to enhance the internal strength but didn't neutralize the poison otherwise what would have been the use of such a precious medicated wine if one use antidote to negate its poison.

The internal energy of these two people was not enough to neutralize the poison but because of antidote it didn't break-out at that time but suddenly now after so much time it broke-out.

In meantime both Zhang San and Li Si had severe pain in their abdominal region, their whole body went numb. These two people knew the situation is very critical, they direct their internal energy towards their pubic region hurriedly trying to bind the medicated wine in that region only and hoped to contain the poison outbreak in that part only and slowly bit by bit neutralize the poison before it reaches other internal organs otherwise they feared that if reaches

their heart then its too late to recover.

However by now their life hanged seriously in the hands of other people, even if they can resist the poisoned wine in their stomach, actually it will be very difficult to run away from the main hall of 'Iron fork sect'.

Two people thought: "So we two people who have roamed the martial-art world freely, today die in here."

Chief Helmsman Yu, that person surnamed Hu and all the other people of the 'Iron fork sect' saw Zhang San and Li Si suddenly leaning on the chair, sweating profusely, muscles on their faces twitching, with very painful facial expression, they were amazed greatly. Various people in the martial-art world shake even by the name of these people, although when they saw them in this situation everyone thought that they won't get a better opportunity to get rid of them in a thousand years, but no one dared to act.

Shi Potian asked: "eldest brother, elder brother, you two have gotten drunk and now suddenly got sick?"

Zhang San and Li Si didn't answer him. They were partly lying and partly sitting and trying to direct their internal energy to neutralize the abdomen poison, not after much time a faint trace white smoke emitted from the top of their head.

When Yu Desheng saw the white smoke emitting from the top of the head he hurriedly said in a low voice: "Brother Hu, these two people are not injured or suffering from any foul disease and are moving internal energy to neutralize the poison, everybody move quick!"

That person surnamed Hu felt great happiness, actually he didn't dare to approach, but the moment he heard chief helmsman he moved quickly and threw a iron fork at Zhang San. Zhang San tried to avoid it but only managed to divert it slightly, the iron fork inserted his shoulder and the blood splashed.

Shi Potian called out in great surprise: "youyou? You dare to injury my eldest brother?"

The various people of the 'Iron fork sect' saw this young person looking flustered and acting with helplessness so didn't pay him any attention. When they saw that the fork of Brother Hu has already stabbed Zhang San and let

alone attack, he even didn't managed to deflect it properly felt happy and got inspired greatly, everyone shouting and whistling, at the same time three more Iron fork flied towards Shi Potian.

Shi Potian moved his left arm and in one horizontal swipe shakes off two iron forks and extended his right hand to meets the third iron fork. He moved sideways to protect both Zhang San and Li Si. Suddenly it was confusion in there, five more iron fork were thrown at him.

Shi Potian moved his hands to deflect the iron forks in a chaotic manner and because of his abundant internal energy it flied back, two iron fork stabbed at some person's head, another one stuck someone's abdomen.

Yu Desheng saw that this place is very narrow and too crowded and more of his people with get injured or lose there lives if it continues so he called out: "everybody stop for a moment, let me deal with this young thief first."

As soon as he bent his waist, both his hand moved and by the time he straightened up, in each hand, he already had a shining short steel fork.

The 'Iron fork sect' people withdraw in abundance, they stood close to the wall and called with one voice: "Look at chief helmsman, how is he going to tidy up this thief boy."

In that underground secret room, the sound cannot pass on and turned in a melancholy.

Yu Desheng gave bow, and then with exceptional speed attacked Shi Potian suddenly, both short steel forks were up and down, and moved respectively toward his cheeks and his waist.

Shi Potian has not expected the opposite party to go offensive so quickly and unexpectedly, he called out: "Ahh" and yelling this he stepped out forward one step, but at the same time the iron fork connected with his waist and right arm at the same time. When he tried to grab the iron fork, Yu Desheng saw that this person's martial-arts was not that great so his spirit soared and rest of 'Iron fork sect' people too sensed him and shouted repeatedly, he moved like a tornado.

Shi Potian's right arm was injured lightly, but his waist was got stabbed and it was really aching. He saw that Yu Desheng was again moving with amazing speed

and will strike his vest, immediately he leaned his body to get out of the way, turned over his palm to attack the opponent.....

This move was taught to him by Ding Busi. When Yu Desheng who was a expert in hand-to-hand fight saw Shi Potian executing a move although its posture was really ugly, but when he raised his hand he heard a faint sound and recognized the fierce internal energy and inside his heart felt terrified.

He used his life-long experience and immediately changed his move, now both small steel forks moved to stab Shi Potian's key acupoints.

Zhang San and Li Si were trying to contain the abdomen poison and at the same time were looking at Shi Potian and Yu Desheng fighting, they knew that today they will live or not will be decided by the victory of Shi Potian. They saw with their own eyes innumerable good opportunities missed, both were feeling pity and anxious, but didn't dare to lose concentration.

As the fight continued, Shi Potian's right leg was struck by the short steel fork, he cried out: "Ahhh" and shot out his right palm toward Yu Desheng. Yu Desheng sniffed a thick sweet ice-cold odor, and he felt dizziness in his head and the next moment he fainted. Shi Potian gave a foolish expression and leapt backward.

That person surnamed Hu came up quickly and saw Yu Desheng's face turning its color and changing to purplish black, obviously he was hit by a violent poison; as soon as he sniffed that odor, he was dead.

He got shocked and angry almost at the same time, the hissing sound came out: "little thiefthis boy, you poisoned our chief, we will get you! Everybody, this boy had killed the chief helmsman."

All the 'Iron fork sect' people cried and took out their iron forks and pointed towards Shi Potian and started stamping it creating massive noise.

Shi Potian kept in front of Zhang San and Li Si. As he didn't dare to leave them and knew the moment he left his place everyone will move towards these two righteous brothers.

Ten iron forks moved towards him, he desperately snatched an iron fork broke off its handle and used it as a saber executing the Golden Phoenix skill, made a horizontal swipe to keep away the attack, he exerted his formidable internal

energy on the fork.

The moment iron forks connected everyone experienced an incredible shock and suddenly ten iron forks were flying in the air. One person stood his ground and tried to grasp Shi Potian and attacked him with his body.

Shi Potian saw his aggressive move and moved his left hand to strike him, he connected him above his ten fingers, only heard a ka-ka sound, the his wrist bone broke off , he stopped for a moment and then suddenly fell on the ground, dead on the spot.

All of sudden it was a melee. No one was paying attention to his life and hurriedly seven-eight people attacked Shi Potian, some were using their iron fork, some empty-handed. Shi Potian didn't dare to move back even one step, saw several people attacking together; he moved his palm to hit. He didn't know what happened but suddenly the opponents start falling down immediately as if some kind of divine help.

This way in succession he managed to knock out six people, several people yelled: "this boy's poisonous palm is fierce, everybody be careful."

Also some people called out: "Elder brother Wang San was also killed by this boy's poisonous palm, this youngyoungevil heart" his words were not even complete and thump, he fell to the ground, an iron fork hit him hard on his face. This person was not hit by the palm of Shi Potian, still he too died.

The 'Iron fork sect' people got intimidated, they withdrew step by step, but heard sound of choking, the sound of something being struck or falling to the ground, several sounds of 'Ahhh....Ohhhh..' were heard. Several people tried to turn around so they can run away, but after two steps or so fell and died.

In an instant, in the hall hundred people were lying and that place was filled up with dead, only alive person were four highest skilled people, they put out a hand to cover up their nose and mouth and rushed outside but before they reached the hall entrance, four people then pushed a group, and also fell dead.

Shi Potian saw these scenes, and got frightened and stared speechlessly. He compared this situation to the one in the corpse ship which he met at the Azure mist island and got panic-stricken even ten times more. At that time he saw the corpses of the 'flying fish sect' people and they were already dead but at this

moment he was fighting with them and suddenly all of them died themselves. He did not know what happened and which malicious ghost did it.

He remembered these people saying that the poisonous palm was fierce, so he looked at his palm, saw on his both palms some group of dark red spot like a blood red cloud, these red cloud also had innumerable blue color stripes. When he swore brotherhood with these two people he saw a red spot on both his palms surrounded by blue spots but at that time it was really tiny, he did not know how its appearance changed so much suddenly.

He looked at it once again, cannot bear to see and felt disgusting, only thought that these two palms have become similar to belly of a poisonous snake or centipede walking on its hand, he smelt some kind of stench and also felt a thick cold breath.

He turns the head to look towards Zhang San and Li Si, he saw only gentle looks of both people, on top of their head were thick white clouds, an iron fork still sticking out of Zhang San's shoulder.

He thought: "I should pull out this iron fork from his shoulder."

As soon as he held the fork handle to pull out gently, blood sprouted from Zhang San's shoulder. Shi Potian hurriedly tore his front tunic and bound his wounds.

He heard Zhang San saying in a low voice: "youlisten to ...what ...Isayaccording tomy wordsmake" he said one word at a time, the sound and the intonation were both low and slow. In handling poison Zhang San and Li Si were equally matched, but because of his shoulder wound Zhang San has lost a lot of blood and also his wound had got infected so he was feeling really weak.

Shi Potian nods anxiously and said: "yes, yes, eldest brother please instruct."

Zhang San said: "put yourleft handto the.....back of my ...heartto hold the ...Lingtai acupoint" then he spoke a few more words, spent a long time, then only he managed to teach Shi Potian how to use his internal energy to force poison out of his body, by the time he was finished Zhang San was already sweating profusely, his complexion was still red like blood.

Shi Potian didn't dare to neglect, as everything depend on him he started immediately, untied his coat, with his left hand held down his Lingtai acupoint, with his right hand held the Shan-Zhong acupoint, with his left hand forcing the poison and with the left hand attracting it, within a small time a thin thread of smoke rose from his heart as poison start to dissipate.

Shi Potian used all his internal energy to force poison out Zhang San body, suddenly he heard the footsteps sounds, and around ten people rushed inside holding iron forks in their hand. These people followed orders and stayed outside to guard. A long time passed and they didn't heard any sound so they came to check immediately, even in their worst dreams they couldn't have expected that chief helmsman and all the brothers were lying on the ground horizontally, all dead.

At first they were panic-stricken, but then they saw Shi Potian, Zhang San and Li Si sitting on the ground, obviously they were seriously injured, various people shouted at once and attacked with their iron forks to stab these three people.

Shi Potian was treating Zhang San, unexpectedly these people rushed in. he turned around to resist them. They have just crossed about ten meter or so then suddenly all of them kind of got paralyzed, went on their knees and died by the time they fell.

Shi Potian was frightened, his heart nearly jumped up his mouth, he started to tremble and said: "bigEldest brother, in this room there is a malicious ghost. We should quickly leave....."

Zhang San shook his head, by now he had rested and around half the poison of his body was now neutralized, the abdominal pain was now a lot less fierce and he said: "youwith this methodtreat ...elder brother Li Sialso."

Shi Potian said: "Yes...yes!"

So as instructed by Zhang San he again repeated the same process on Li Si. After some time a faint trace of cold air started to come out of him, as the poison in the body of Li Si started to reduce, he felt better and asked Shi Potian to help out Zhang San.

So he started once again on Zhang San, this way he kept on alternating between both Zhang San and Li Si for three more times. Although there was still

some poison left inside their body but was now harmless. They wanted to leave some part of poison inside their body so that their body gets used to it and can resist it.

When both people looked around and saw the corpses, then only remembered how dangerous the situation was just a few moments back, and cannot help but to feel a lingering fear. They thought that Shi Potian has just now neutralized their poison however some time back he himself had somehow forced the poison to his palms.

Actually when they saw his face, it looked as though he is scared, but his manner was as usual, was not feeling any poison. They really believed that this boy had unknowingly taken 'immortal lingzhi mushroom' that's why he has such an internal energy and is quite impervious to such deadly poison but whatever the reason they were both very happy also felt grateful secretly.

Obviously they knew that when the 'iron fork sect' people attacked him he utilized his internal energy vigorously and in the process forced out the poison from his palm in the air and poisonous winds, within a few time the entire hall was polluted by this poisonous air and whoever breathed died, such was the potency of the poison.

This was not a easy matter to explain to Shi Potian, when they saw that he hasn't asked the reason for this carnage, they also didn't raised the issue.

Zhang San said: "Elder brother, third brother, let's go!" he walked out followed by Li Si and Shi Potian.

As the three people come out of that tunnel, they saw about a dozen more people outside with iron forks in their hands and looking around.

When they saw them coming out alone, one of them shouted and others started to encircle them. Some people shouted asking questions: "Where is chief helmsman? Why is he not coming out? How are you people coming out alone?"

Zhang San said with a smile: "Your chief helmsman is inside!"

That person asked again: "how did you come out first?"

Zhang San replied with a smile: "I can't explain it right now, its better that you go inside and find it yourself."

Suddenly both of his hands moved and he held a person by his chest and threw him in the tunnel. The 'Iron fork sect' people called out in alarm and numerous iron forks moved to stab them. Zhang San didn't dodge to evade their attack and fished his hand in air to seize their fork and the next moment two people were thrown backwards.

Shi Potian stood in one side, and saw Zhang San grasping the iron forks of these people conveniently, very easily, no matter what the opposite party did to resist his moves still he was able to get there forks and used it against them. The more he looked the he more he was surprised, thought earlier I saw elder brother's martial-art and now I am seeing again, it's really amazing and incomparable, he is truly a expert.

Li Si folded both his hands and stood behind, he didn't go forward to help Zhang San. In a moment Zhang San has knocked down about ten people. People were lying here and there. The person lying farthest yelled: "run away!"

He tried to rush into to the tunnel, other people too followed him in.

Shi Potian called out: "There is danger inside, do not go in!" but actually no one listened to him and all went in.

Under his heart he had innumerable suspicions: How can the 'Iron fork people' just die like that? Why the two elder brothers got poisoned and suddenly have stomach pain? Why did eldest brother catch up with into these many people in the tunnel? He did not know whether he should ask these questions then after a while finally asked: "eldest brother, second elder brother!"

Zhang San said: "well! Who is there on that side?"

As soon as Shi Potian turned his head and looked at that side, he saw no one, not even a shadow, he asked: "what person?"

He didn't hear any response from Zhang San so he again turned around and whoop!

No one was there...there was no trace of Zhang San or Li Si too. He was shocked and didn't understand why both elder brothers disappeared suddenly.

Shi Potian shouted: "Eldest brother, two elder brothers! Have you gone in there?"

He called several times but no person came out and he didn't hear anything so he came out of the tunnel.

He was at loss so he thought about looking in to the houses in the village. He came out of that thatched hut and rushed in to seven-eight houses but didn't found a single person.

In the meantime he saw the red sun glowing; it was morning now, every place was sunlit but in this big village, he saw no one and it was entirely empty.

He remembered the situation in the tunnel and in the hall where various people died such a tragic death and cannot help but shivered. He cried loudly and then ran away. He ran for about ten miles and then only slowed down. He suddenly thought about his palms and looked at them, the palm's red cloud and the blue grain has now again reduced to about half of when he saw in the hall, also it didn't look that disgusting now, thinking this he tried to console his heart.

He still did not know that his strong internal energy actually has forced this acute poison out of his abdomen through the meridians to the palm. After learning the 'arhat's divine demon subduing skill' in the ancestral hall, he was practicing his internal energy every day, so gradually as this violent poison reduced, his internal energy was also improving along with it, this way after the nineteenth day all the poison from his body will be expelled.

He leisurely strolled along the road, walked about half of the day and arrived near the Yangtze River. Along the shore he saw a main road so he took it and went ahead immediately.

Shortly before noon he bought some noodles from a small town to eat and then traveled in the East direction. He had no cares, so he roamed willfully. As the evening came he saw a yellow wall in front of him in the woods. He went near that place and saw it was a temple, the house was grand, before the gate was a broad and straight greenish-black slate road, at the entrance were standing two guards carrying long sword's and wearing yellow hat like a Taoist.

The two guards saw Shi Potian approaching towards the temple.

One of them a middle-aged person asked: where are you coming?"

He saw Shi Potian wearing dirty cloths, looked quite young and also a bit slow-witted; the way he was looking around, so he spoke in a very impolite manner.

Shi Potian didn't think much about it and said with a smile: "I just walk casually and there isn't anything specific I want. Is it a Buddhist temple? I have money, so I can buy food to eat.

That guard got angry: "this boy talks nonsense. Do we look like Buddhist priest? We have not opened a hotel here and are not selling food. Who are you showing your money? Get lost! Get lost quickly or if you deliberately start trouble again here, I will break your leg."

The other young guard pressed the sword hilt, on his face a wicked grin appeared and he looked as though he will draw his sword and kill him.

Shi Potian said: "I was hungry that's why I asked to buy some food to eat. I am not interested in fights. Why should I kill you?" as he was saying he turned around to get out of the way.

That young guard got angry and said: "what did you say?" and he move ahead to catch him.

After saying that Shi Potian understood that this person might have misunderstood him; He remembered how in the tunnel hall so many 'Iron fork sect' people have died and in his heart regretted it. He didn't want fight with more people, so when he saw that young guard moving towards him with an intension to fight, he was scared that he might kill him so he immediately ran away into the woods.

He only heard the two guards laughing at him and the middle-aged person saying: "That dirty boy really got frightened, a real coward, the moment he saw us he ran away with his tails in between his legs.

He saw the two Taoist priests are no longer pursuing him and also saw it was getting dark. He wanted to look for a wild fruit or something to appease his hunger, but in the forest there were only pine trees or the cedar trees or nothing that had any fruits on them.

He rushed to a small hillside took a higher position to look out. He saw only that Taoist temple and around ten or so houses. From one of the chimneys of

house he saw a white smoke coming out; obviously someone was boiling the vegetable to cook.

Besides this Taoist temple, he looked out in all directions as far as the eye can see, there were no other houses.

He saw the smoke coming from kitchen chimneys and heard chaotic sound from his stomach.

He thought: "these Taoist guards are really fierce, as soon as I open my mouth they will start to fight, maybe I should take a look from behind, if it has anything to eat, I may took it and then walk away. Only in that case I need to put down the money or I will be a young thief."

Immediately he circled the forest around the Taoist temple, looked for the on the smoke from kitchen chimneys, jumped over a wall, stayed in line of the wall, saw one of the back door semi-open and moved sideways to enter inside.

By now it was totally dark, even one can go to the courtyard, but he heard the sounds of people talking, the sound of spoons in the vegetable pot, the 'psst' sound of oil in a cooked food, the intermittent fragrance fluttered in the entire courtyard. He was looking precisely at the kitchen. Shi Potian swallowed the mouth saliva quietly and immediately hid in a dark corner in the corridor to the kitchen entrance and thought "It looks as this these meals are to be delivered there. I hope that if I walk away with a bowl of meat then these people will not fight and kill people for the rest of the food."

He was really thinking of going in, and then three people came out from the kitchen. All three were young Taoist priests, one person was raising a lantern and the other two were following him with various trays, in the plate were hot cooked food, fragrant overflowing, obviously there were several delicious meat dishes.

Shi Potian swallowed greedy saliva, put the light footsteps and followed them on the heels quietly. Three young Taoist priests passed through the corridor, and arrived in a main hall, and put down the cooked food on the table. The young Taoist priests turned around to go out, keeping down the chair for one more person, keeping the cups and chop sticks for a total of three people.

Shi Potian hid outside the long window; he looked for anyone in the hall or in

the corridor. He waited with extreme anxiousness while those young Taoist priests moved out of his sight and then quickly went inside the hall. He quickly started with the bowl and the braised beef and filled them in his mouth and both his hands ripped through the steam chicken's leg.

He had only swallowed the first beef, and then he heard a sound outside the long window, someone saying: "Younger brother, younger sister, please come in."

He then heard footsteps sound and several people were arriving at the hall.

Shi Potian thought in his heart: "It's not good!"

With only the steam chicken leg in his hand, he hurriedly pulled out some money from his bosom and put it on the table and then rushed to the back room, he heard the footsteps sound from back room too, and obviously there were also some people. He glanced around in the main hall and saw that there was no place for him to hide completely. He cannot help but cursed his luck: "It looks that I have to fight these people."

In a few moments all these people were already near the long window, he remembered the 'Iron fork sect' main hall and how everyone died. He exactly didn't know how they all died but he still felt guilt in his conscience about their death, as he was fighting his own demons. He was desperate to avoid any fight so he glanced again and saw a big plaque hanging at the crossbeam. He didn't think much and immediately jumped up onto the crossbeam, and hid behind the plaque.

He straightens up after bowing and performing the kowtow, and took shelter apologizing. The moment he hid behind the plaque, the long window was shoved open and several people walked in.

He only heard one person saying: "Brothers please, senior brother is really too polite to have prepared such delicious food and wine."

Shi Potian listens to this voice and felt familiar; he peeped downward from the gap between wooden plaque and crossbeam and only saw several people accompany a male and female, both these people sitting together. Obviously these two people were the famous Shi couple; Shi Qing and Min Rou. He felt really grateful to these two people, especially Madam Min Rou. He remembered

how she had in the past presented him silver as a gift, also that day in temple of village god she taught him some sword skills and was very compassionate towards him. As soon as he remembered it, he felt warmth in his heart.

The person with white hair said: "Younger brother, Younger sister, you have come from far away. I am really happy and am offering did glass of ordinary wine."

Suddenly he saw on the table, some juice was dripping, in a large bowl, there was only left over remnant soup. In bowl's main meat dishes, a chicken leg was missing. He did not know how it suddenly vanished into thin air, also nearby the bowl were kept some silver ingots.

The person with white hair wrinkled his brows and thought that these young Taoist priests are really negligent, nobody is on guard here. It looks as if a cat has eaten some food and ran away. These visitors have come from such a far place; I can't even reprimand these fellows for their mistake.

By now the young Taoist priest who cane to serve food and all other people too saw that bowl of remnant soup and felt awkward. That priest hurriedly moved and tidied the place as nobody said about anything.

That old person than asked Mr. and Mrs. Shi Qing to take the seat of honor and himself sit at the side, he stroked his gown sleeve stroked lightly and covered up the silver ingot. He waited for a few moments and then removed it n such a way so that no one can he see it.

In the centre these three people took their seat and the rest of the Taoist priests divided themselves in two rows and sat on the other side.

After three rounds of wine that old person sighed and said: "I'm seeing you after eight years... such a long time. Younger fellow-disciples, you look great and wonderful. Your stupid Elder fellow-disciples have grown old and withered.

Shi Qing said: "senior brother had grown his hair white but in his spirit he is still healthy and vigorous."

That old man said: "what white? I am still like a bull in my heart. All my hair turned white in only one night. Younger brother, younger sister if you people had arrived three days ago, you could have seen my beard and hair at least half black

and half white.

Shi Qing asked: "Senior brother, Are you worried about the two envoys of the 'command of reward and punishment'?"

That old man sighs and said: "Perhaps apart from this matter, there isn't any other matter in this martial-arts world right now. Only two things matter right now, this 'Shan Qing' temple and these young Taoist apprentices."

Shi Qing said: "I and younger sister were nearby Lake Chaohu when we heard from some people that the two envoys of 'command of reward and punishment' have resurfaced in the martial-arts world. So we traveled through out the night and came here to discuss a strategy with the chief of 'Shan Qing temple' and all your fellow apprentices.

'Shan Qing' temple has such a high reputation in martial-arts world for past ten years. Perhaps high position invites criticism, so those two envoys of 'command of reward and punishment' can be targeting you senior brother as you are the head of this temple. If you don't have any problem than younger brother and sister will like to stay in the temple for a month in case those two visit us, although our skills are pretty poor but still if senior brother doesn't mind, we can serve with our lives."

That old person Tian Xu sighed gently, fishes out two bronze medals from his bosom, and placed them on the table.

Shi Potian was sitting above their head; saw it clearly, same two signs, a smiling face and an angry face, just as he had seen earlier. He was unable to restrain his heart to thump madly and thought: This old Taoist priest also has these two signs?"

Shi Qing too was shocked and cried: "Ohhh", then said : "so those two envoys of 'command of reward and punishment' already got you, so after all we are one step late. It's a difficult matter. When did it happen? Senior brother youHow did you dealt with it?"

Tian Xu sat silently, didn't answer for a while, and then said: "This happened three days ago. As head of 'Shan Qing temple' and for the righteous cause, I had complied with their wishes and accepted the invitation to take the 'Eight meat gruel' in the island of heroes.

Shi Qing saw the two bronze medals, also saw the look in the faces of all the priests in the temple, he had already guessed the situation the moment he came in, stood up suddenly and immediately bowed in front of him clasping his hand and said: "Senior brother has taken the heavy burden of taking care of this 'Shan Qing' temple alone, younger brother feels ashamed and expresses his thanks. But younger brother has a presumptuous request; I hope senior brother doesn't refuse."

Tian Xu returned his salute and said: "Worldly thing, at this moment doesn't matter to me lot. My worthy brother what ever you say I will do."

Shi Qing said: "So it means Senior brother has consented?"

Tian Xu said: "Obviously consented. My worthy brother, but can I know what exactly your instructions are?"

Shi Qing said: "Your younger brother is brazenly bold, but senior brother you must invite us husband and wife to share the command of this 'Shan Qing' temple."

The moment he said his words the countenance of the people in the hall changed.

Tian Xu didn't reply and hesitated.

Shi Qing said: "Younger brother and his wife want to share the command of this sect so we can go the island of heroes and taste the 'Eight meat gruel'."

Tian Xu laughed, but his laughter was actually filled with bitter, astringent meaning. Tears glistening in his eyes, he said: "my worthy brother, I declined your request with thanks. I have been chief of this 'Shan Qing' temple and the sect for past ten years. It is well-known in the martial-art world, today in time of crisis, if I evade my responsibility or even shrink back in fear than what face can I show to others.?"

He spoke these words and put out a hand to hold Shi Qing right palm, said: "my worthy brother, you are far to younger than me right now, you also have a family although small but still you have one. Your martial-arts is really very good even you are best in our sect and so is your moral behavior. I usually drink a lot and getting old.

I have already agreed to go to island of heroes and eat 'Eight meat gruel'. I would have happily given you command of the 'Shan Qing temple' but in these circumstances I really can't follow your instruction. ha, ha!"

His laughter was full of irony.

Shi Potian listened about that island of heroes and the 'eight meat gruel' and didn't understand any thing. He once listened about it from his eldest brother at the 'Iron fork sect' main hall, however the way this old Taoist was speaking about eating that 'eight meat gruel' was entirely different. As soon as that Taoist mentioned that appointment, his look changed entirely.

He thought: "is it some fatal poison in that gruel or what?"

He again heard Tian Xu saying: "my worthy brother, my hair turned white in a single night, it is not that I covet my life or am afraid of death. I am already sixty-two this year, even if I have died this year, it could have been considered as is dying of old age. My only concern is this great misfortune of the martial art world every ten year. Can we maintain the prestige and honor of our sect?"

That is the true difficult matter. During the past 30 years, the island of heroes has organized this 'eight meat gruel' feast about three times.

At each meeting, whichever head of any sect has attended this feast, no one has come back. As soon as I die, you should not pity, but it's a time of damage control, we actually must think of some proper method to move forward."

As soon as Shi Qing heard this he too smiled, carried his wine cup, drinks up, said: "senior brother, We husband and wife are overreaching ourselves, but still I must ask the senior brother to yield. It is not the case that we are sending two people of senior generation to deliver their life but actually we must go to find the truth about these people. Perhaps if God blesses us, we can uncover the truth of this island of heroes. Although we did not dare to say that our martial arts can match them but if in the martial-art world no one will try then how can we know about this great evil. As long as someone can unravel this mystery, the martial-art world will be in chaos and no one will be able to stand off against island of heroes."

Tian Xu shakes his head slowly, said: "It is not that I am disparaging your ambitions my worthy brother. Look, the likes of Shaolin Temple's wondrous

truth abbot, Wudang sect's simpleminded Taoist priest, Qingcheng sect's the clear spatial Buddhist priest and so on, several master have gone there and that's it. Although my worthy brother, your martial-arts is high, eventuallyStill in comparison to the Shaolin temple's abbot and Wudang sect's Taoist priest, it's nothing."

Shi Qing said: "Younger brother actually do know about all these stuff but every thing is not just a matter of merit but also half depends on the luck. We have to somehow exterminate this big evil, or at least try to acquire some knowledge about them otherwise everything else is a futile exercise."

Tian Xu still shook his head, said: "'Shan Qing' temple should prosper for hundreds of year. After I die you should take care of it. Hereafter my worthy brother, you husband and wife must make every effort to stop this sect from deterioration and annihilation. If you accept this offer I will be deeply grateful."

Shi Qing said over and over but that old person didn't relent. Various people didn't drink at all and put the wine cup as it is, even forgot to eat the delicious food. Shi Potian tore down the chicken gently, squeezes in his mouth; he was afraid that they might hear him chewing and swallowed it completely. He was eating but his entire attention was on the people and their discussion.

He saw Shi Qing and Tian Xu discussing and rest of them listening. Madam Min Rou didn't interrupted, after some time she slowly puts out a hand and took the two bronze medals, looked at the meeting and conveniently held it to her bosom.

Tian Xu called out: "Younger sister, please lay it down!"

Min Rou shows a faint smile and said: "I am receiving it for the senior fellow-disciple, isn't the same."

Tian Xu saw that she is not willing to give up these bronze medals so puts out a hand to seize. This time Min Rou stretched out her chopsticks towards the bowl of red-roasted rice field eel, intercepting his move, his right arm just blocking Tian Xu's palm.

As soon as this happened, Madam Shi collided her empty hand with that of Tian Xu and quickly pulled it back. She exchanged the bronze medal in a flash from her other hand and said: "Now I received it from you!"

Madame Shi raised her left hand; her four fingers moved as though she was playing a pipa (a lute with four strings) to flick his wrist. Tian Xu moved his left hand towards Madam Shi right wrist. She fluttered her right wrist, the left middle finger sprang and a great force moved in the direction of Tian Xu's chest.

Tian Xu has taken over the leadership of the 'Shan Qing' temple for last ten years and was adept at numerous palm techniques.

He knew both the Shi couple themselves want to go their death, even though they have originally good intention in their heart, but these two bronze medals involved him and he had already accepted the invitation in front of the entire temple, so if it falls in to someone else hand and he loses his life than what face can he show to others.

He saw Madame Shi attacking at his chest so immediately wields the palm to parry her move.

Both these people did not left their seat and had fought in a blink of a eye about seven-eight moves, both these people had learnt from the same teacher and were disciples of Shan Qing temple. Although they were using moves which were not dangerous and still it was not just a practice session and both wrestles with all their strength in that little space. When two people of same school meet and compared their martial-arts skills after about twenty years, in their heart both were really pleased by the exquisite skill displayed by the other. Even though they had met several times during these last twenty years; still they never got an opportunity to test their skill against each other.

The rest of the Taoist priests who were apprentices at the 'Shan Qing' temple watched these people comparing their skill with rapt attention. These people knew about Shi couple for more than ten years, by their astounding reputation in the realm of rivers and lakes. They also knew that how they rushed to help them and saw with their own eyes how Madam Shi had robbed bronze medal from Tian Xu showing amazing composure and thought that she really deserve the acclaim and reputation.

These two people were evenly matched for about ten moves but Madame Shi was holding those two bronze medals in her right hand so she was only able to use the fist of her right hand and was unable to cancel some Tian Xu palm moves

by grasping or any other open-hand techniques, so she was at a great disadvantage. Also Tian Xu was trying to put pressure on her to open her palm so he can get back the bronze medals. Madame Shi knew in the heart that she can't hold these medals for some time so she threw the medals using internal energy towards her husband, all the other disciples of Tian Xu saw the elegance and internal energy involved and didn't dare to compete with Shi Qing to snatch the medals.

Shi Qing puts out a hand and was just about to take, suddenly he felt a strong force moving towards his face, it was precisely Tian Xu, he has executed the 'Shan Qing' temple's sect's double palm move, the moment he saw Madam Shi throwing the bronze medals. Although this move was not that difficult to handle but it was a very formidable move, if one does not resist then can be seriously injured, even if he took the bronze medal in the hand, still he would probably drop it after the impact. As he was left with no option he didn't move towards the bronze medal and right away moved his palm to obstruct Tian Xu's move.

As soon as soon as Shi Qing took the defensive posture, the medal moved towards Zhao Xu, one of their fellow-disciples, who caught it with his hand. The moment Zhao Xu caught the medals all the four started laughing and he Shi couple gave up the idea of getting the bronze medal.

After a moment Shi Potian saw Tian Xu smiling and bowing towards Madam Shi and said: "Younger brother, Younger sister, please forgive me for offending you."

Mr. and Mrs. Shi Qing hurriedly stood up and returned salute.

Shi Qing said: "Elder brother, please don't say these words, actually we husband and wife were very disrespectful. The internal strength of elder brother is so strong that we can't even think to compete against you. Although we did a stupid mistake, but still as it's said if one part of body get injured, entire body feels the pain. Alas! we are in an utterly hopeless situation."

When Tian Xu used his internal strength then only Shi Qing realized how strong his internal strength really was.

Tian Xu forced a smile and said: "Younger brother, please don't mind and say these word. Let's drink!" He took a wine cup and tossed it.

Shi Potian saw Min Rou sighing at her lack of skill; he did not know that these two bronze medals have what significant responsibility. He was only concerned about her failure and thought: "this Taoist priest has snatched the bronze medals; I will take it from him and give it to Madame Shi."

He saw Shi Qing standing up and saying: "I hope senior brother returns safely. Younger brother's manners were really despicable and we didn't even talk properly about the old days. Now we are leaving elder brother, goodbye."

Every one shivered with fear in their heart as he said these words.

Tian Xu asked: "I have heard that my worthy brother had sent his son to the 'Snow mountain sect' for learning martial-arts. Despite the incomparable prestige of you husband and wife still 'Snow Mountain sect' has shown reckless courage to capture your son?"

Shi Qing sighed and said: "This matter is a long story, most probably it's my fault that I was not able to teach my son proper moral values. It's my son who has committed evil so what's the point blaming others."

His sense of rights and wrongs were absolutely clear, although Bai Wanjian has burnt down his family manor, still he knew that his son had committed the crime and he didn't have any resentment against 'Snow Mountain sect'.

Tian Xu said in a clear, resonant voice: "Younger brother, younger sister, these people have kidnapped your beloved son, obviously they despise our 'Shan Qing temple'. No matter how big or powerful there background is, even though our skills are poor still we must help you to get your son back."

He paused for a moment and then said again: "your beloved son got captured because of their superiority in numbers, actually we can still catch up with them if we leave 'Shan Qing' temple immediately. We are fellow-disciples and should help each other. Younger brother tell me, are still not good friends after all these years?"

He thought that the enemy did not fear Shi Qing couple and were confident of there victory just on the basis of their numerical strength. He thought that the 'Snow Mountain sect' is reckless and disrespectful to send its disciples to capture Shi Zhongyu.

Shi Qing and Min Rou both were not willing to take the skeleton out of the closet. They also thought the 'Shan Qing temple' is right now facing a imminent disaster and already have to deal with a powerful enemy. Obviously this is not a right time to have 'Snow Mountain sect' as their enemy too.

Shi Qing said: "senior brother, thanks for the kindness, we husband and wife are deeply grateful. We have not yet fully investigated this matter and don't know exactly how these things happened. Let us, younger brother and wife go and properly look in to the matter and if needed, we will return to the 'Shan Qing temple' to ask for senior brother's help."

Tian Xu said: "Exactly, Younger brother, younger sister, please don't waste more time and go and look for your beloved son. Once you get any news please come to 'Shan Qing temple' and then we will leave immediately."

Both Shi Qing and Min Rou cupped one hand in the other across the chest to express gratitude, however in their heart were actually downcast and thought: "The 'Snow Mountain sect' had already ordered the execution of our child, we husband and wife should accept the fate. How can we come to the 'Shan Qing temple' to ask for reinforcement?"

After that both people said goodbye and moved out, Tian Xu and rest of the group too followed them out to see them off.

Shi Potian saw these people leaving and immediately leapt from the plaque on the ground and then quickly left the room and crossed the wall. Once he was outside, he thought: "That master Shi and Madam Shi said that their son was captured by some people, actually who, I don't know right now. It looks like that bronze medal is only a plaything and is immaterial. It seems that these people are fellow disciple and were just playing with that bronze medal and they have a very good friendship.

Madame Shi treats me very well; I must help her to pursue their son. I should ask her first, her son's age, what was his appearance and who has captured him?"

He leapt on to o a tree and saw two rows of ten lanterns in north-east direction. It looked the 'Shan Qing temple' disciples were seeing them of the forest.

Shi Potian thought: "These Shi couple both ride two very fast horses, I should try to run as fast as possible to catch them."

He saw that both people were taking a straight road, so he jumped from the tree and ran along the hillside after them.

He didn't pay much attention and ran near the gate of the 'Shan Qing temple'. He heard someone yelling: "who is there? Halt!"

When he hid behind the plaque in the main hall, he held his breath and concealed himself without making any noise so no one detected him but here he was running and using his internal strength and unconsciously created quite a ruckus and immediately caught the attention of people nearby.

He stopped there only maintaining his composure as the Shi couple went farther and farther on their horses.

In the darkness, suddenly Shi Potian felt two swords moving towards him, two Taoist priests took out their swords in front of them, the sword's edge glimmering with the star light. It was extremely hazy, he saw to his left and saw that Taoist priest was that disciple of 'Shan Qing temple' who caught those bronze medals and in his heart, he felt happy and said: "Honorable Taoist priest?"

That Taoist priest got startled for a moment and then said: "Yes, who are you, sire?"

Shi Potian stretched his right hand and said: "I am here to take the bronze medal from you."

Zhao Xu got angry, and shouted: "You will get this!"

The sword then moved to stab his leg. In 'Shan Qing' temple, the commandments were very precise and rigorous, do not kill the innocents. Right now he didn't even know the origin of the opponent, however the moment Shi Potian said he wants the bronze medal, it was kind of a taboo to him and he attacked.

Even though he was attacking the leg still it was a strategic point. Shi Potian slanted his body to avoid it; his right hand grasping his shoulder. Zhao Xu saw that he was agile, so he moved his long sword in a circle, aiming at his left

shoulder.

Shi Potian lowered his head quickly to avoid it getting drilled; he feared that the sword will cut his head; so unconsciously he moved his right hand towards him. Zhao Xu only sniffed for a moment some fishy irritating stench from that dirty person, then felt dizzy, tried to stay on his feet but in a time one blink his eyes, he fell to the ground.

Shi Potian got startled, suddenly the second Taoist priest stabbed at his back with his long sword. He knew that there is something strange with his palm, as soon as he brings it to attack someone, people get killed. He didn't dare to counterattack, he took a vertical leap and scoffed a sound, and his long gown was cut from the back by the sword. That Taoist priest thought that this person has evil intension and attacked more vigorously with his long sword moving to stab Shi Potian.

Shi Potian slanted his body to escape this move; he hurriedly picked up a long sword which was dropped by the other priest. He saw that this Taoist priest' swordsmanship was really swift and fierce, so he immediately moved his sword and executed the Golden Phoenix sword moves. In his hand the sword along with the internal energy was very formidable, the moment the two swords connected, that Taoist was not able to hold the long sword in his hands and let it go. But he was the disciple of 'Hand of palm sect' so he was well versed with the palm and seizing techniques and didn't feared this situation when he was empty handed.

He took crouching posture and threw himself straight on Shi Potian's bosom, with his both hands tried to grasp the hole between his lower chest's land abdomen. In his hand he didn't have the sword and the enemy had the sword, so it was favorable for his to have a close hand-to-hand fight, this way the enemy won't be able to use his weapon.

Shi Potian called out: "it's not allowed!"

He then attacked with his left hand and shoved that Taoist priest aside. By now the strong internal energy of his palm pushed the poison out along with that blow and as soon as Taoist fell to ground, he never got up.

Shi Potian stamped the foot again and again, said: "oh! I didn't want to harm

you!"

He heard the voice of dogs howling. He looked at the empty road and the two people on ground, both slumped and looked dead. In the dim light he saw two bronze medals still at his bosom. He puts out a hand to take it, puts it in the bag and stepped back and pursued anxiously after Shi couple.

In one breath he pursued them for about ten miles. He hadn't heard the sound of the horse's hoof so thought: "These two horses are really quick, can I even catch them or not? Is it also possible that I came in the wrong direction? Shi Qing and madam Shi might not necessarily take this main road."

As he was thinking suddenly he heard a sound of horse neighing from one side. He looked in that direction and saw two horses tied under a willow tree, one black and the other white. They were precisely the horses of Shi couple.

Shi Potian felt great happiness and took out the bronze medals from his bag in to his hand. He waited for moment to yawn and was just about to call the Shi couple when he heard the voice of Shi Qing from a distant place: "Younger sister, this young thief is stealthy following us. I think he harbors evil intentions. We should just wait and let him pass."

Shi Potian was startled and thought: "they do not like me coming after them?"

Although he heard the voice of Shi Qing; but didn't see these two people. He was afraid that if they see and attack him. Then he might kill them too if he is not careful. How can that be good?

He shrank his body hurriedly in the long grass nearby and waited for few moments. He thought that he should wait for Min Rou to appear and then will toss the bronze medals towards her and then will run away.

Suddenly he saw a person's shadow flying out from the left side, holding a long sword in his hand pointing towards him and calling out loudly: "my friend, you are following us. What are you up to? Come out quickly." She was Min Rou.

Shi Potian only managed to say: "I".

Then he heard sound of someone scoffing and then suddenly he heard three ringing sounds, someone was throwing hidden projectiles at Min Rou.

Min Rou moved her sword firmly and the projectiles fell on the thick patch of grass.

Then all of sudden a person with black clothing leapt out from that patch of grass and attacked Min Rou with a sword. Shi Potian felt it was strange that this person was hiding there too. He saw that person was very agile and skillful. He brandished his sword creating a hu-hu sound in the air. Min Rou resisted him very conveniently but didn't counterattack.

In a moment Shi Qing also came out, the long sword hanging in his waist. He crossed his hands behind the back, observed the fight for several moves and then said: "hey friend, are you a disciple of Lu's Shiba from Taishan sect, isn't it?"

That person said: "yes, why?" He was still attacking Min Rou and the wiry sword didn't stopped.

Shi Qing said with a smile: "Although we don't have friendship with Lu Shiba but we also don't have any animosity between us. So why are you following us husband and wife for last four-five miles, what is your intention?"

That man said: "Don't have free time to follow you people....."

Initially Min Rou was not attacking her and just making superficial moves, but had actually thrown him in to confusion.

Shi Qing said with a smile: "The sword skills of Lu Shiba are really formidable, but you have actually not even learned the 30% of the original sword skill so it's better for you to stop."

The moment Shi Qing said these words Min Rou moved her long sword to stab his wrist at the same time, flutters her body to go behind him, reversed the sword and hit him with the hilt of sword and sealed up his acupoint.

With a thud sound his wiry sword hit the ground. If Min Rou has completed her move with a straight sword then there would have been a big hole instead of a sealed acupoint.

Shi Qing said with a smile: "friend, what is your name?"

That man was really stubborn and said: "If you want to kill me then kill me, why are you asking mu name?"

Shi Qing said: "Friend, please don't say then. It doesn't matter. I think you have allied with a secret group and your master doesn't know anything about it?"

The color of that man face changed to white, as if he said: "how do you know?"

Shi Qing said: "Your respected master Lu Shiba don't have any enmity with us so why will he send someone to track us husband and wife and especially he is such a respected authority, why will he send a disciple like you to track us."

The implied meaning was obviously that your martial-art is far too poor and you are not even good enough to follow us so your master will never send you after us. That man's face turned in to purple with shame when he heard this but fortunately it was a dark night so no one noticed it.

Shi Qing put out a hand on his shoulder, patted twice and said: "We husband and wife are very straight forward and frank people and we are not secretive about our whereabouts. If want to know than we will tell ourselves. We are just coming from the 'Shan Qing temple'. You can visit the Taoist temple and ask master Tian Xu about us. Actually we were disciples of 'Shan Qing temple' in our youth and master Tian Xu was our senior fellow disciple.

Now we are going to the Snow Mountains, to Lingxiao city to pay visit to the Snow Mountain sect's chief "Gentleman of Impressive Strength and Virtue". If the friend wants to ask anything else, then please ask away!"

That man only thought that he only patted me twice and my acupoints are open, and admired him inside his heart, then he bowed and cupped one hand in the other across his chest and said: "You Shi couple treat people justly and leave up to your reputation; the younger generation has offended you."

Shi Qing said: "flattery!"

That man didn't dare to pick up his wiry sword from the ground, held his hand again in front of Madame Shi, bowed and said: "Madame Shi, forgive me for offending you!"

He then turned around to walk. Madame Shi returned the salute.

That man went ahead several steps, suddenly Shi Qing asked: "Friend, your secret society's Shi Bangzhu can know our whereabouts?"

As soon as he said these words, that man's body shook and he turned around and said: "youYouhad known?"

Shi Qing sighed and said: "I didn't know. I don't have any information. Isn't it?"

That man shook his head and said: "I too don't have any information."

Shi Qing said: "We husband and wife are also looking for him."

All three people looked at each other for half a day and then that man turned around and walked away.

Min Rou said: "senior brother, is he from clan of eternal happiness?"

As soon as Shi Potian heard "clan of eternal happiness", these three word, he felt a jolt in his heard.

Shi Qing said: "When he turned around to get out of the way a moment ago, he raised his gown lapel; I vaguely saw a chrysanthemum embroidered on his gown. In the darkness I hadn't saw it clearly, but as soon as I spoke thoughtlessly unexpectedly his response gave all the answers I needed. HeHe was tracking us originally forfor our son Yu'er. If only I had known it earlier, I wouldn't have pressed him to leave."

Min Rou sighed and said: "TheyThey are helping Yu'er and are actually very loyal to him."

Shi Qing said: "Yu'er is the chief of 'Clan of eternal happiness. This sect is really very powerful and has lot of people in the sect. They are definitely looking for him and will try to rescue him from the Bai Wanjian and Snow Mountain sect. I am surprised that despite there numbers and contacts, still we have heard nothing of him."

Min Rou said mournfully: "how do you know that they have not still rescued him.....can't we get back to him and ask?"

Shi Qing took her wife's hand and pulled her to sit beside him under the willow tree, and said warmly: "Look, if they had known any news about our son, they wouldn't have sent people all around looking for him in the realm of rivers and lakes. This Lu Shiba's disciple was sparring with us just for no reason, but only to inquire us about his whereabouts, otherwise what feud we have with this

person."

Both the Shi couple sat near the thick patch of grass where Shi Potian was hiding merely at the distance of about twenty feet. Although Shi Qing spoke lightly, Shi Potian was actually able hear clearly.

Originally the martial-art of the Shi couple was very good, but after they came out of the 'Shan Qing temple' they were very sad and disappointed and moved out talking with each other and were a bit careless. But after sometime they realized that someone was following them that's why they tied there horses to tree and waited for the intruder to come.

Shi Potian also had extremely high internal strength and his footsteps were also very light. No one detected his movement when he came and hid in that thick grass patch, obviously he didn't know that that person with wiry sword was also hiding there.

Shi Potian heard these two people talking about the 'clan of eternal happiness' and their son being captured by Bai Wanjian. He thought about his earlier life experiences, of how he has been misunderstood most of the times so he kept hiding in the grass. If a person suddenly comes out from nowhere it's always very awkward. So he simply decided to stay there and hear what they are saying.

He heard wild insects chirping, breeze moving the trees violently. Both the Shi couple were no longer speaking. Shi Potian feared that they might discover that he is hiding there, didn't dare to breathe heavily. After a long time, he heard Madam Shi sighing and weeping gently.

He heard Shi Qing saying slowly: "We two people have been roaming the realm of rivers and lakes for such a long time but we didn't have anything on our conscience and we owe no one. For these last few years we are looking for our son and hoping he is fine and trying to do good deeds. If God really wanted us two people to have no children then it would have been fine but to have such an unfilial child... it would have been better if we had no child."

Min Rou said in a low voice: "Yu'er, although since childhood was mischievous and naughty, heHe still is our heart and treasure. We have always doted on him and always liked him, maybe you are tired today, butBut you are not that resentful. That day in that small temple, I looked at him and he didn't

looked as though he was as evil as people say. In fact we competed for some time with our swords, only unconsciously I stabbed.....him....." She was not able to finish her word as she remembered those scenes and sobbed.

Shi Qing said: "I have urged again and again not to feel sorry for that day, even if on that day we have rescued him still I am not sure we might be able to keep him with us. This matter is really strange. After that day the Snow mountain people disappeared without a trace suddenly in that area south of Yellow River. Also we haven't heard any other news in martial arts world. Tomorrow we will move towards Lingxiao city. Once we get there whatever for good or bad at least we will know the truth."

Min Rou said: "If we could have taken some efficient people with us to the Lingxiao city at least in some critical situation they might have helped us, isn't?"

Shi Qing said: "The matter of the saving him is easier said than done. If one cannot rescue him in the midway then as soon as Yu'er arrives at the Lingxiao city, its like the sheep entering the tiger's mouth and will be really difficult to return alive."

Min Rou didn't say anything, took out the handkerchief to wipe her tears, waited for some time and then said: "I think that this matter cannot be entirely our son's fault. You saw on that day in the temple how unfamiliar he looked with the Snow mountain swordsmanship. The Snow mountain disciples didn't looked that good in martial-arts, our son was well extremely talented and striving to excel and always tried to outdo others, that's why they are making him suffer." As she said she again started sobbing.

Shi Qing said: " It was me who miscalculated and still regret the moment when I decided to send him to Snow Mountain school. On that day as soon as I asked him to go to Snow Mountain School to learn martial-arts, although you did not say anything, but I know in your heart actually you didn't supported that decision. I can't believe that 'Dragon of wind and fire' Feng Wanli will ill treat the son despite having friendship of us husband and wife."

Min Rou said: "This matter really strange. You send our son to the Lingxiao city, although you knew my thoughts still you sent him. I must go to them and despite my martial-arts skill will try to save our son. It would be inappropriate for

you to go and save him but we mother and son will collaborate, and then may defeat the enemy. I know...I know...Oh!"

Shi Potian saw these two people speaking and thinking how to get out of this situation and thought: "Madame Shi really misses her child. It looks as though her son is captured by the Snow mountain sect, I must go with them to the Lingxiao city and try to help them to save him. She just said that she wanted some help?"

As he was thinking, he heard the faint sound of hoof beats from a distant place suddenly, about a dozen of horses moving towards them.

Both Shi Qing and Min Rou too heard the sound of people on horses coming towards them and didn't talk but sat silently.

When they came closer, the horses came to a stop and some person called out: "in here!"

Another person yelled: "Younger brother Shi, Younger sister Min, we have few words to say."

Shi Qing, Min Rou heard the Taoist priest yelling and shouting and felt surprised and quickly stood up.

Shi Qing asked: "Elder brother Chong Xu, what's the matter in the temple?" He saw Tian Xu, Chong Xu and all the other fellow apprentices. Two Taoist priests were holding one person each in their hand. The night was not very bright so he can't see clearly who these two people are.

Chong Xu said loudly: "Shi.....Younger brother Shi, Younger sister Min, you were not able to snatch those bronze medals of 'Command of reward and punishment' in the temple in front of us all so you used underhand techniques and used poison to snatch it. You did that it fine but in this process you people unexpectedly strike a vicious blow and killed Zhao Xu and Tong Xu, these two people guarding it, that ...that is too unreasonable!"

Shi Qing and Min Rou listened to him such saying that and were surprised.

Shi Qing said: "Elder brother Zhao Xu and Tong Xu are murdered by a person using vicious poison, this is violent treachery, thisThis? Both senior fellow-disciples were killed by same person but why?"

He was concerned of the fellow apprentices' safety, at once didn't differentiate himself with them.

Chong Xu said in anger loudly: "We did not know that you have colluded with some lowly assassins who dare to use such violent poison which is most despised in the martial-arts world. Although these two people have not died yet but they are pretty close to death."

Shi Qing said: "let me take a look."

He approached the body as he said these words; passed the two Taoist standing closest to him, suddenly several Taoist priests drew out their sword and came forward to block his way.

Tian Xu said: "Allows him to pass through! Brother Shi is not that kind of a person."

Those several Taoists sneered and lowered their swords to yield the way.

Shi Qing made his way in between the angry Taoists to Zhao Xu. He saw the faces of both these people, a purplish black color appeared, and obviously both have been hit by a violent poison. He saw both people breathing very lightly and it looked as if their life was already hanging on a very thin thread. However the martial-arts of the 'Shan Qing temple' was very good and their internal energy was also very deep, also Shi Potian had not directly hit them with his palm but they have only sniffed that poison from his palm and fell down feeling dizzy.

Shi Qing turned his head and asked: "Younger sister, have a look and can you tell who have done this violent treachery?"

He turned his head and saw about seven-eight Taoist priests each waving a long sword have surrounded him.

Min Rou saw the people looking at them with hostility but ignored them completely and went to see both of them. She received a folded booklet from Shi Qing, and went close to the two people to look at them. As she went she smelled the poison gas and felt dizzy and couldn't help but to draw back one step.

She hesitated and said: "In the realm of the rivers and lakes, I have not seen this kind of poison. Can I ask Elder brother Chong and you two elder brother if you have ever seen such kind of poison? Is it that they taken this poison by

mistake? Are they hit by an enemy's hidden weapon? I don't see any scar on the body."

Chong Xu got angry and said: "how do I know? We are here to precisely ask you people about it? We have just eaten food with you husband and wife. In fact younger sister it was you who tried to snatch the bronze medals from Elder brother. If there was any poison in the wine then you two people would be in this condition and we all would have been poisoned. Zhao Xu had the bronze medals and only he is poisoned and near his death and he doesn't have those medals now. It...it looks as if he was robbed by you people.

Min Rou got mad when she heard these words and her facial expressions changed, but she was gentle in nature, since childhood she had lived with these fellow apprentices and so was not willing to argue with them. Tears rolled out from her eyes in streams. Shi Qing knew that there is a huge misunderstanding between them and the Shan Qing temple disciples because obviously he hadn't poisoned these people and they were squarely blaming all of this on them and the way both people behaved in the Shan Qing temple just now they were attracting significant suspicion.

He stretches out his left hand to take her wife's right palm, comforted her and paced back and forth for a while.

Min Rou said: "II" only said these two words and couldn't say another word and cried. She was a top martial-art exponent and roamed the realm of the rivers and lakes but never flinched back from any challenge but today when accused by his own fellow apprentices she couldn't help herself and her feminine side took over.

Chong Xu said furiously: "you can cry as much as you want but your crocodile tears"

He didn't complete his words as suddenly someone shouted from behind and said: "You people don't know how to discriminate between right and wrong and treat good person carelessly?"

Everyone heard these words said in anger and got surprised. At once everyone turned around; they saw a man standing several ten feet away wearing clothing like a Han Chinese. He didn't look like a grown up and by his face looked really

young.

Shi Qing, Min Rou saw this person and were really delighted. Min Rou said: "you...you" but she couldn't complete her sentence and said 'my son'.

This youth was obviously Shi Potian; he was hiding in the thick patch of grass. When he heard these people blaming Min Rou and Shi Qing he thought that if I come out than more people can die because of his poisonous palm so stayed there but after some time when Chong Xu started misbehaving Min Rou he couldn't help himself and came out shouting in anger.

Chong Xu shouted at him loudly: "who are you? Who are you to tell us what is good and what is bad?"

Shi Potian said: "Master Shi Qing and Madam Min Rou are good people and hadn't taken your bronze medal. You blamed them that they have stolen it, how can you accuse people wrongly?"

Chong Xu took his sword in his hand and said: "Young fellow, you don't know anything and are actually talking nonsense in here!"

Shi Potian said: "obviously I know."

He originally wanted to say that obviously he had taken it but thought if he tells them now then definitely they will attack him and more people will get killed so he checked himself and didn't speak any further.

Chong Xu moved towards him and thought may be he knows the truth. and said: "So who took it?"

Shi Potian said: "Listen there is no way Master Shi and madam Shi could have hurt your two brothers. You have offended them, and also stirred up Madame Shi to cry. Who would kill people in hurry and sit here to wait for you."

Min Rou was longing for her son for such along time and suddenly she saw the child who she has kept her in her womb for nine months safe and sound, needless to say she was extremely happy. When she heard him defending her mother in front of Chong Xu she felt very proud. Actually she had two sons, but she had suffered innumerable pain and had flowed innumerable tears for them until at this moment.

Only when she heard her son saying these words to protect her mother, her mood changed to happiness immediately. She thought that all sorts of pain, sadness, anxiousness and humiliation which she had received for him for last twenty years were at not all in vain.

Shi Qing saw his wife complexion changing and she looked extremely happy, tears streaming down her face. He understood her sentiments and clasped her palm in his hand tightly to reassure her and thought in his heart: "Although my son has done all sorts of unfilial acts but at least he has been filial to his mother."

Chong Xu heard this young person contradicting him again and in his heart again felt angry and said in a loud voice: "who are you? Who are you to say me that I misbehaved with Madame Shi?"

Min Rou saw his son voicing against injustice and said: "Senior brother, there is a misunderstanding between us all. Once the truth will come out you won't blame us. "

She turned to Shi Potian and said: "They are our seniors. Kowtow to them, quickly."

Shi Potian already had a soft corner in his heart for Madam Shi and when he saw her complexion changing to happiness, she looking at her with tearful eyes, felt a emotional attachment to her. In his life, he had rarely met with people who really loved him with sincerity, so when he saw her then cannot help but felt a warm feeling in his heart. At this moment even if she ask him to give up his life no matter what he would fulfill her every wish.

Without any hesitation, he kneeled down immediately in front of Chong Xu to kowtow and said: "Madam Shi has asked me to kowtow to you, I pay my respect!"

Tian Xu, Chong Xu and rest of the Taoist priests saw his obeying Madam Shi without any hesitation. They thought that although the Shi couple had two children but one has been killed by their enemy in his childhood and another one is captured by Snow mountain sect, then this young person should definitely be their disciple.

Although Chong Xu was really angry but actually he was a Taoist priest and he had practiced breathing exercise for long time. When he saw Shi Potian kowtow

to him sincerely, his anger went away and he relaxed.

He put out his hand and to help him up and said: "Don't be so polite!"

When he tried to lift him up he felt as though he was trying to move a mountain and unexpectedly couldn't move him, he was unable to restrain his anger and said: "you, when your elder is not relying on internal strength, you are try to show off!"

He immediately moved his internal energy to his arms and made an effort to lift him and make him somersault.

Both the Shi couple saw Chong Xu taking his posture to use his internal strength. They both have learned from the same school had knew he had very good internal energy. Shi Qing felt a bit angry, but thought that Chong Xu is fellow apprentice so he has to let his son take the fall.

However Min Rou called out: "Senior brother shows mercy!"

Actually the moment she called out, they saw Chong Xu soaring in the air backwards and falling on the saddle of the horse. Chong Xu executed the move "thousand catties to fall" and landed on the horse. If it was any other ordinary horse then it would have died on the spot but this famous horse of Shi couple just hissed loudly and its forelegs kneeled down to absorb the impact.

Shi Potian had enormous internal energy, when Chong Xu tried to throw him instead got thrown backwards and nearly fell.

Everyone saw it and were extremely surprised. Both the Shi couple had already seen Shi Potian in the temple of village god and knew his internal energy cultivation is quite high but they never imagined that his internal strength is so formidable that he would be able to throw back Chong Xu, who was a top martial-arts expert of 'Shan Qing temple', just by restraining his attack.

As soon as Chong Xu stood firmly on the ground, his left hand immediately moved to his waist, he drew out his sword. He was seething with anger but still managed to smile and said: "good, good, good!" He said "good" three times, only then took a breath and said: "Young fellow, Younger sister has trained you well and she too has a outstanding disciple. Let me ask you for some pointers."

As he was saying these words his sword aimed towards Shi Potian's chest.

Shi Potian drew back one step, waved his hand and said repeatedly: "No, no, I don't want to fight with you."

Chong Xu was just thrown by Shi Potian. He was a fellow-disciple of Shi Qing and Min Rou. If he withdraws now then he will be laughing stock in the martial-arts world. On the other hand he was from the older generation so he couldn't just force Shi Potian to fight.

When he saw Shi Potian himself running from fight, exactly as he was hoping so he said: "We both person are on the same side and also we don't have any disputes. We are just comparing our skills in martial-arts."

Shi Potian said: "You are a fellow-disciple of Master Shi and Madam Shi. If in the fight I kill you then it won't be good."

He was really feeling uncomfortable at this moment. He only feared that he might kill him with his poisonous palm and so spoke thoughtlessly.

All the Taoist of 'Shan Qing' temple were extremely proud of their martial-arts and thought that he is mocking all of them and has indeed bad intension in his heart. About more than ten Taoist priests moved forward towards Shi Potian in anger.

Shi Qing too shouted: "what did you say? Do not talk nonsense."

Chong Xu looked at Tian Xu and fellow Taoists. He had his sword already in his hand. After listening to these humiliating words from Shi Potian, how could have he endured such insult again. He moved forward with big strides and shouted to clear the way: "Good, now I want to take a look at you and see how you will actually kill me, make your move!"

Shi Potian didn't moved and waved his hands saying: "I won't make move against you."

Chong Xu angrily said: "humph, you see with me such disdain!"

He moved his sword to stab his shoulder. He saw Shi Potian didn't have any weapons in his hand, so he attacked a place which was not that critical. He was a priest in the Shan Qing temple and also didn't want to make the Shi couples his enemy so he made his first move at his shoulder but didn't used much internal energy.

Shi Potian moved sideways but was not to be able to avoid this move and only heard a light sound; his shoulder was stabbed by the sword, immediately a lot of blood poured out.

Min Rou called out in fear: "oh!"

Chong Xu shouted: "Take out your sword quickly!"

Shi Potian thought: "Just now I have killed two of Madam Shi's fellow apprentices, if I kill this person than firstly it will be unfair to madam Shi and secondly I too will become a unprincipled person."

When Chong Xu stabbed him with his sword, he could have retaliated and forced him to divert his attack, but he was afraid that if he moved his hands then he might poison him, so he clasped his both hand behind his back and was unwilling to use them in fight.

When the Taoist priests of Shan Qing temple saw him not moving his hand to fight they thought in their heart that this person is really arrogant and is not even giving face to them and obviously despised him greatly.

One Taoist called out: "Elder brother Chong, this boy is arrogant, teach him some lessons!"

Chong Xu said: "you are treating me with disrespect from the start?" he took out his swords and brandished them in air. Suddenly he made his move. Shi Potian didn't knew much about his sword skill, he tried to move quickly and dodge the attack, but was still unable to avoid the attack. He was hit on his left arm and right chest by the sword.

Fortunately Chong Xu was just trying him to use his hands and attacked in such a way that he won't get any serious injury but some minor flesh injury. When he saw that he still is not attacking him and just trying to evade the attack, he quickly retracted his sword immediately.

Min Rou saw her beloved son getting three sword wounds and felt deep pain in her heart. Right away she saw Chong Xu taking posture for another move. He wielded his sword to stab Shi Potian again.

For a moment everyone heard the sound clink-clink and then sound of parched beans one after another for thirteen times. In a blink of an eye Chong Xu

attacked thirteen times and Min Rou blocked each of his moves. Both people were highly skilled and from the same school and one by one executed some exquisite sword moves of Shan Qing temple 'on the clear quick sword', 'jumping straight like a shooting star', 'the splashing flame' and 'rapid victory for coherence'. As soon as they executed these thirteen moves, all the Taoists and Shi Qing cried in one voice: "Excellent!"

On that place all these people, besides Shi Potian, each one of them were highly skilled martial-art expert of 'Shan Qing' temple. They saw Chong Xu has executed all these thirteen steps swiftly and fiercely but Min Rou's defense against these moves was also extremely solid and compact. In a moment both of these people has displayed some extraordinary sword skills and everybody looked completely relaxed.

Tian Xu knew that if these people are again involved in fight then it won't be easy for both of them to come out without victory or defeat.

He said: "Younger sister, so you have decided to protect this young person?"

Min Rou didn't answer and looked at her husband to take them out of this situation.

Shi Qing said: "This child has no regards for elders and superiors. He shows reckless courage and disrespect. This serves him well."

He points to the three sword wounds on his body and said: "It is only his fortune elder brother Chong has showed mercy and have not taken his life. This child's martial-art skills are really shallow, how could have he defended himself against such an exponent like elder brother? Child, quickly kowtow to all the elders and ask for forgiveness."

Chong Xu said loudly: "he despises us obviously from the start only. Why would have he said that he can kill us to get rid of us?"

Shi Potian spreads out his palm and saw a faint red spot with cloudy blue line still present there. He sighed and said: "This pair of hand will always cause trouble and will then kill people."

The color of every Taoists changed as they heard these words from Shi Potian. Shi Qing listened to his wild and crazy attitude and thought he is still threatening

these people and in his heart he too felt great anger. He was unable to restrain himself and shouted: "You...boy doesn't know the immensity of heaven and earth. You threaten the elder fellow apprentices, who have just shown mercy and have not killed you, don't you know?"

Shi Potian said: "III do not want to kill him, so I have also shown mercy."

Shi Qing was angry, he wanted to grab this young boy there only and hit him with his fist, his appearance changed slightly. Min Rou at once knew his intension and held on his left arm immediately.

Shi Qing pulled his arm, although didn't make effort in a big way and stood motionless.

Chong Xu had just stabbed Shi Potian thrice and saw him trying to avoid his sword moves. Obviously he was not able to understand the entire essence of his sword skills but his internal energy was exceptional. According to his knowledge it was quite unlikely that he was a disciple of the Shi couple. In his heart, he already had some suspicions, but when Shi Potian lifted the palm to look at them he smelled a light stench and his suspicion increased significantly and shouted a question: "Little boy, whose apprentice you really are, from where you got such a glib-tongue?"

Shi Potian said: "III am the eldest disciple of the 'Golden Phoenix sect'."

Chong Xu thought for a moment: "what 'Golden phoenix, silver crow sect? In the martial arts world I have never heard a sect of this name; this boy is talking nonsense mostly."

He sneers and said: "I also heard that your Excellency is also best disciple of 'Golden Phoenix sect'. Actually this matter doesn't involve you so don't meddle in our internal matters."

He looked at his left side and winked at two Taoist priests.

Both the Taoist priests understood him and moved forward towards Shi Qing and Min Rou, reversed their swords and executed move "worship money to excel". This move of "worship money to excel" was one of the basic move of

‘Shan Qing’ sect. It was usually executed as a ritual to pay respect in front of opposite party when they are elders of the school or perhaps famous senior expert in martial-art world.

It was a purely defensive move, the moving sword pointing towards the ground, the left hand on the sword hilt, looks as if saluting. Both the feet pretty close and firm on the ground. This move actually defended the body up to five feet actually. If the enemy is not moving then oneself is motionless, but if the enemy assaults, then can counterattack easily.

The Shi couples were confused. They didn’t know what to do. They knew that if they don’t make any move than these Taoist will not attack because of their past relationship but the moment they try to save their son and pick the sword up, immediately they have to accept challenge.

Min Rou has compared her skills earlier with these Taoists years ago in ‘Shan Qing temple’ and thought: "in the past when in Shan Qing temple, we were learning martial-arts, at that time their skills were far inferior to me, but this "worship money to excel" executed by them looks quite strong and steady. It seems they have improved a lot in these years and she was afraid it would take at least thirty-forty moves to defeat them."

As she was thinking this, she saw Chong Xu vibrating his sword continuously. He has already rounded Shi Potian and said: "If you don’t hit back again, I will execute all the evil people of Golden Phoenix sect".

He called ‘Golden phoenix’ clearly and obviously wanted the Shi couple to hear, so they don’t get angry later in case this person is really their disciple.

Shi Qing thought its time to take the bull by its horns. He knew that if his son does not hit back again then Chong Xu will really hurt his badly this time, but if hits back to fight then if he can hold him for some time and lose then maybe he can survive, so he called out immediately: "child, elder brother is a top expert in the martial-arts world, to take pointers in martial-art from him will be a greatly benefit you. Elder uncle is not going to hurt you severely so don’t fear and take out your weapon and resist quickly!"

Shi Potian only saw Chong Xu moving his sword really quickly, the dazzling sword reflection in the moonlight engulfed him, and he felt a dense cold air

emanating from the sword and was really terrified. Chong Xu had already stabbed him thrice so she quickly moved aside. He already knew that this Taoist is very fierce. When he heard Shi Qing asking him to hit back, in his heart he felt happy and thought: "If I use a weapon instead of a palms to fight with him than its likely that the poison on my palms will not kill him."

He glanced at his side and saw there was a wiry long sword lying on the ground; it was precisely the one which disciple of Lu Shiba left there after losing to Madam Shi.

He called out hurriedly: "good, good! I will fight back, youYou must not stab me from behind when I am picking this sword. If you seize this opportunity to attack me from behind that it won't count, also you will a shameless person."

Chong Xu saw him saying these words in one breath, looking helpless and also funny at the same time, he exclaimed: "Pooh!" and drew back two steps and with bu sound inserted the sword in ground.

He said: "You, you think I Chong Xu will sneak attack on a boy like you?"

He inserted both hands in the waist and waited for him to take the sword, and thought: "The sword moves of this boy doesn't look similar to our sect, so its unlikely that he is a disciple of Shi couple. I don't understand why this Shi fellow has called me his elder uncle then?"

Shi Potian bent down to pick up the wiry long sword, suddenly a thought came to his mind: "I should fight really carefully, if I am not careful enough then this could turn out be a very difficult situation. If unconsciously my left hand moved and hits this person than surely he will die, so to avoid this I should tie my left hand with my waist. If it is tied then obviously I can't strike him with my palm and won't kill him." So he stood immediately and said to Chong Xu: "sorry, I should ask you to wait for some more time."

He untied his waistband immediately, hung his left hand and started to tie it with his waist; various people were looking surprisingly at him. No one knew what exactly is he trying to do. Shi Potian tightened the waistband and knotted it firmly and then again bent down to take the wiry sword and said: "Now it's fine, let's compare our skill, now you won't get killed."

Chon Xu went mad and nearly fainted as he heard this. He saw this young

person tying his left hand to his waist and asking him to duel with single hand. He really hated him for this act. Several Taoist priests scolded him at once.

Shi Qing and Min Rou also reprimanded him, said: "this child is really impolite, untie this waistband quickly!"

Shi Potian hesitated for a moment; in the meantime Chong Xu moved his sword to stab at him. He didn't have time to honor the instruction of Min Rou. He simply moved his wiry long sword to keep off the attack.

Chong Xu knew that the internal strength of this person is very strong so he avoided the contact of his sword and immediately changed his move. His sword created 'shua-shua' sound six-seven times as he brandished his sword for stabbing him.

Shi Potian was in complete confusion, didn't have any clue how to resist, also he was totally unaware of the opponent's sword skill.

In his heart he called out: "This is it then!"

He started to move his wiry long sword in randomly chopping manner with absolute lack of coherence. He has learnt the seventy-three sword moves of Golden phoenix sect but at this moment his mind went blank as if all skills he learnt vanished in the thin air.

Fortunately Chong Xu knew that this person's internal energy is extremely strong that's why he didn't act rashly. He was able to see lot of flaws in his sword chops but he was adamant on avoiding his wiry sword hitting his sword for fear that he might not be able to hold it after contact because all his moves were accompanied by a fierce internal energy.

Shi Potian kept on randomly swiping and chopping his wiry sword for some time.

He saw Chong Xu withdrawing a bit, decided to calm himself down. Gradually the seventy-three moves of Golden phoenix sword skill came back to his mind. Although Chong Xu withdrew a bit but he attacked again with extreme speed. Shi Potian wanted to use the sword skill of Golden phoenix sect but he remembered that Grandma Si has created this set of sword skill to defeat 'Snow mountain sword skill'. Its move were precisely to negate the various moves of

Snow mountain sect. Its use will be completely incompatible with his opponent's sword skill. He again felt perturbed in his heart and started to brandish his wiry sword on his whim randomly.

As he was moving his sword randomly he suddenly remembered his duel with Bai Wanjian on the Azure Mist Island. He remembered how he lost the fight because he was not aware of some of the moves of his opponent. At this moment this Taoist priest's sword skills were even more unfamiliar and since he didn't know anything about it so kept on randomly brandishing his wiry sword around himself.

This disorderly chaotic sword moves using some of the Golden phoenix sword moves and with vigorous internal energy formed a dazzling circle and Chong Xu didn't dare to attack again.

All the Taoists and Shi couple were astonished. Chong Xu too was shocked but was getting more angry. He was a bit timid inside in his heart but still was a veteran martial-art expert and had seen sword skills of various sects and knew how to deal with them.

He saw this sword skill of Shi Potian was not only extremely simple and artless, but also disorderly. It was directly opposite the basic fundamentals of martial-art, irrespective of the opponent's move he was simply moving his sword in a random manner, but whether correct or not at least his moves were extremely effective.

Chong Xu was getting anxious as the fight dragged on so he again launched about ten moves in succession. This time Shi Potian brandishes his sword in a circular motion and suddenly there was a big impact, both the sword collided. Chong Xu was expecting it and already using his full internal energy and grasped his sword really tightly, but Shi Potian has enormous internal energy. People called out in fear as they saw the sword of Chong Xu bent from the center in to right angle and blood dripping on it from his mouth.

Actually in a single stroke the famous expert of Shan Qing temple lost the fight. Even though he could still fight but what face now he can show in martial-art world and in the Shan Qing temple.

Chong Xu went mad and threw his bent sword at Shi Potian, stretched his both

hands to move towards him to grasp him immediately. Shi Potian moved his sword to smash the bent sword in the air but didn't know what to do after that and hesitated as he saw Chong Xu was coming at great speed towards him, his palms pointing towards his critical acupoints.

This move of Chong Xu was extremely risky both ways. This move to attack the acupoint on the chest was very rare Shan Qing temple move. His both hands bumped in to his acupoints, but wasn't able to seize them as Shi Potian's internal energy was too strong for him and he felt a incredible force hitting him back and his body recoiled back, the more strength he applied, the more the reactive recoil hit him back. He couldn't hold his more and actually sat on his bottom there only. He couldn't believe he lost to this clown in such a big way.

Tian Xu quickly moved towards him to support him. He extended his palm to his left to give him support and gave a push by his internal energy. Chong Xu immediately leapt up to stand on his feet firmly but his face lost it's color entirely.

Tian Xu drew out his sword, and said: "We really have a young hero among us, I really admire, well done! This poor priest will like to take advice from you young man; I only fears that I already have one foot in the grave, won't be match to you."

As he was saying this he moved his sword towards Shi Potian to stab in but very slowly. Shi Potian lifted his wiry sword and blocked his move; however the moment the both swords met, suddenly the opponent's sword strength vanished without a trace. He cannot help to restrain and called out: "strange!"

Chong Xu already knew that his internal energy is really strong that's why he was testing his internal strength and quickly withdrew his sword back, but even in this minor contact he felt as though his right arm went numb and he felt a severe ache in his chest. He was shocked and was afraid that he suffered a serious internal injury so he waited and didn't make his next move.

Shi Potian too lifted his wiry sword but didn't dare to attack with his full internal energy and attacked with a slanted sword immediately.

Although Tian Xu was already over 60-year old, still he has not lost any agility in these past years. He moved steadily and made his move.

Shi Potian didn't make any move towards him as though he didn't want to hurt him and turned a blind eye on him no matter what sword move opposite party executed he simply kept on using executing his own set of moves.

In fact he was now using the various Golden Phoenix sect moves like 'Snow blossom meets the summer', 'thousand honored pressure camels' and 'scorching red date'. It was really difficult for Tian Xu. He was afraid of sword collision; on the other hand Shi Potian was practicing his sword moves.

This way the two people executed about twenty more moves. The sword wind was getting violent and the circle started to get bigger and bigger as people tried to avoid it.

The two Taoist priests who were initially standing between the Shi couple and Shi Potian were now helping each other out.

Both the Shi couple were now free to help Shi Potian but Tian Xu and Shi Potian both were in the middle of a fierce fight and they couldn't help but to watch it from the distance.

At first Shi Potian was afraid in his heart, but as he started to use different Golden phoenix sword moves, slowly he started to get more confidence and his moves became more graceful and with his exquisite internal energy, his sword play was really immaculate. Tian Xu was too was feeling a bit confident initially but as Shi Potian got more confidence he was not able to find any chink in his move. His internal energy looked inexhaustible and he saw no signs of his internal energy fading. He only thought that both his legs were gradually weakening, feeling increasing pain in his arms and he found really difficult to make his next move after some time.

By now the Shi couple too saw that the situation has changed dramatically. Tian Xu was in very weak state; they wanted to call their son and ask to stop but didn't want Tian Xu to lose his face. They were in a very difficult situation right now and saw no way out as both people were dear to them.

Shi Potian kept on executing his move, his sword came closer and closer to him, suddenly Tian Xu felt his right knee went soft and he had to kneel down to keep his balance and his complexion changed.

As soon as Shi Potian saw this opportunity his intention was to attack him but

suddenly he recalled the word of A'Xiu; she said to him on Azure Mist island: "where it is possible to let people off, one should spare them; anyone can make mistakes, forgive them when possible."

As soon as he remembered this he recalled her tender bashful face and how she told him these words and at the same time executed a horizontal swipe at Tian Xu.

Tian Xu saw his sword coming at him with tremendous force, quickly retreated two steps back. His one knee was totally useless now so he somehow limped back these two steps and as the body moved he felt enormous pain and felt as though he has used his entire energy to take these two steps.

Still Tian Xu took his sword moved it towards the left, and then moved it in a circular motion towards his own face, but only stirs up a lot of underground dust to fly upwards.

Tian Xu huffed and puffed but suddenly he was shocked when he saw the wiry log sword of Shi Potian vibrating near his feet on the ground.

He retreated back two steps slowly and stood with help of his sword then he heard Shi Potian saying: "your Excellency, this sword skill is really exquisite, I really admire it, today it is very difficult to find victory or defeat, in this situation why don't we give up this fight and everybody become friends?"

He reiterated the entire sentence A'Xiu told him. Tian Xu couldn't believe his own ears; he stood there and didn't speak.

Shi Qing showed a faint smile and felt relieved. Min Rou was extremely glad and was beaming with joy. Both husband and wife saw their son excelling in martial-arts were happy but the way he actually settled the matter even after winning made them really proud.

Min Rou thought: "This silly child really talks nonsense and irresponsibly. What is this 'your Excellency' and 'become friends'. How can he call our senior fellow-disciple as his friend?"

However she thought even if language is bad still she has no regrets, and was in fact extremely happy. Who can measure the extent of happiness of a loving mother?

Tian Xu changed his tone, shook his head and said: "In Yangtze River, one wave has pushed the other wave to oblivion. I have grown old and useless."

Min Rou said with a smile: "Little child, you have offended our Senior fellow-disciple. Go forward to apologize quickly."

Shi Potian should say: "yes!" he untied his left arm from the waistband, respectfully went forward and kowtowed.

Min Rou saw it and was really satisfied. She said happily: "Senior brother, this is your little nephew, your younger sister's mischievous child. He has not been disciplined enough in his childhood no wonder he is offending everyone."

Tian Xu was surprised, he said: "He is your worthy son, no wonder, no wonder!

Younger brother you earlier said that your worthy son is captured by Snow mountain sect, so you lied previously."

Shi Qing said: "How can younger brother dare to deceive the fellow apprentices?"

This young child was originally captured by Snow Mountain sect; right now even we don't know how he managed to escape."

Tian Xu nodded and said: "Oh ...so this is the story. Actually it's not that difficult to understand how he managed to escape from them. You have a very worthy son, younger brother and younger sister has passed on some incredible sword skill to him, and obviously with his amazing internal energy no wonder Snow mountain sect people couldn't kept him in their custody. His internal energy cultivation is so strong, solid and unfathomable, and this last move of his, its pretty unfamiliar."

Shi Potian said: "A'Xiu taught me this move. She said that when others hit you, you must still show mercy. "where it is possible to let people off, one should spare them; anyone can make mistakes, forgive them when possible."

He has not lived a lot with people so he was not street smart and didn't know what to say in front of others. Tian Xu complexion immediately changed to red, he was ashamed to hear these words in public.

Shi Qing shouted: "keep quiet, what nonsense are you talking?"

Shi Potian said: "I didn't say anything wrong. I initially thought that if I tie my poisonous palm with my waist and use this sword to fight I won't ..." He was going to say "kill" but thought that if complete his sentence then again there will be a big dispute with these priests so he stopped talking immediately.

Tian Xu was already feeling cold in his heart, suddenly he shouted: "what poisonous palm? Have you killed these two Taoist priests? Have you stolen those two bronze medals?"

Every Taoist priest in the group unsheathed his sword as they heard these words of Tian Xu.

Shi Potian sighed and said: "I do not want to kill them originally, as soon as I raised my palm; unexpectedly they fell on the ground motionless."

Tian Xu got extremely angry and turned towards Shi Qing and said in a loud voice: "Shi fellow, how will you explain this matter, do you want to say something!"

Shi Qing was extremely shocked and he couldn't think of anything, he turned his head towards his wife and saw her tearful eyes, she looked terrified, hardened his heart immediately and said: "We are loyal to our sect. This little animal causes trouble everywhere. We husband and wife will not try to protect him now and it depends on the master of the Shan Qing temple to decide his punishment."

Tian Xu said: "It is good then!" he took out his sword and wanted to move forward to attack from both sides.

Min Rou said: "holds on a minute!"

Tian Xu looked at her indifferently and said: "what words did the younger sister have to say?"

Min Rou trembled and said in a soft voice: "According to brother Chong, these two senior fellow-disciples have not yet died. PerhapsPerhaps.....still they can be saved."

Tian Xu sneered at her and said: "These two people are hit by such a violently poison, does it look like they can recover? Younger sister by saying these words, you are only wasting some more time."

Min Rou was well aware of hopelessness, still said to Shi Potian: "Little child, what kind of poison do you have in your palm? Don't you have its antidote?"

As she was saying these words she moved closer to Shi Potian, arrived at his side and said: "I will take a look in your pocket, maybe there is an antidote for it." She pretended to search his pocket, but actually said in a low voice near his ear: "runs away quickly, runs away quickly! Today father and mother can't save you!"

Shi Potian was surprised and called out in a loud voice: "father, mother? Who are my father, mother?"

Just now Tian Xu has said him "your worthy son" regarding him but Shi Potian didn't understand that "Your worthy son" and "your son" are same (some play of word). Shi couple too were saying him "Child" this and "child" that but it is such a generic term that Shi Potian didn't think that they misunderstood him for their son.

Shi Qing felt extremely angry when he heard these words of Shi Potian; he somehow managed to keep his sword at his back and said: "Younger sister, we can't go against our own sect for this animal. He cannot run away!" His words sounded extremely bitter and hurtful.

Min Rou was adamant to save her child, she said: "child, these two people are our elder fellow disciples and are hit by your violent poison, you seriouslyDon't have the medicine to rescue them?"

Ling Xu saw Min Rou standing on his side, saw a big change in her facial expression, thought that Younger sister will try to defend her son no matter what the cost is. He feared that she might even commit suicide, so he extended his fingers to make contact with her, seized her sword in his hand. By now Min Rou had entirely lost her mind was concentrating on Shi Potian, she didn't pay any attention. Ling Xu took her sword from her hand gently without any resistance.

Shi Potian sees him bullying Min Rou, called out: "you are tricking?"

He moved his right hand towards him to take back her sword.

As soon as Ling Xu saw him moving towards him he wielded his sword and swiped at his palm. Shi Potian lowered his palm, and moved his hand towards his

wrist. He used the move "the nine interlocking rings", one of the moves of Ding family's eighteen palm seizing technique taught by Ding dang. It was an extremely exquisite move having several variation in each stance, however Ling Xu too was a veteran martial-art expert of Shan Qing temple, how could have he let him seize his wrist, he used his sword to force him back .

He shouted: "Good move!"

Ling Xu made a circular motion with his sword and took the stance to attack him. Suddenly he fell to the ground. Actually during the last move Shi Potian brushed his sword with his hand and with it the poison too got to his sword. When he moved his sword and took a breath then, in a moment he fell down immediately.

Everyone in the group were shocked greatly, cannot help but drew back several steps. There was huge change in everyone's complexion as though they have seen some ghost or demon.

Shi Potian knew that this disaster has increased more. He saw Ling Xu lying on the ground, all the Taoist have gone back a few steps but still had their swords out and have surrounded him so he can't run away, but he saw Ling Xu too couldn't move, grasping his lower abdomen, was obviously had tremendous pain in his stomach.

The internal energy cultivation of Shan Qing temple was very deep and strong that's why he had survived until now. Suddenly Shi Potian remembered the situation in the main hall of 'Iron fork sect', how so many people died in his hand, how this person was in same situation as Zhang San and Li Si. He remembered that both Li Si and Zhang San's situation was even more worse than Ling Xu still he managed to save them using the technique taught by Zhang San. He thought he should try to help this person too.

Ling Xu saw him coming towards him and moved his sword toward his body to stab him. Shi Potian saved himself quickly and quickly moved his hand to hold his Lingtai acupoint, with his right hand held the pit of his stomach and used the method taught by Zhang San. Ling Xu really felt helpless, he tried to move his hands but couldn't, he started perspiring heavily and scolded him: "Damn you... you thief...little boy...*****!"

As soon as the people listened him immediately shouting in thunderous voice, although he was shouting abuse unlike a Taoist still they understood that he is recovering.

Min Rou bursts into tears extremely, said: "Child, Elder brother Zhao Xu and Tong Xu are also our senior fellow-disciples and are poisoned, quickly treat and cure them."

Both the Taoist were at the point of death earlier. Zhao Xu and Tong Xu both were poisoned for a long time now, Shi Potian immediately used the same technique to cure them. However in a time to burn a joss stick he managed to take the poison out their body.

The moment Zhao Xu got his consciousness he shouted abusing him: "your paternal grandmother is a male!" Tong Xu too contributed: "A ***** has raised this bastard, he dared to poison us."

The Shi couple were endlessly happy, as they saw three fellow apprentices cursing him in such vulgar language, although it implicates them too, still found it very funny and thought: "These three senior fellow-disciples have studied Taoism for so many years, usually appear as very correct person with unyielding integrity, but today in desperate situation are actually speaking such language."

Min Rou said: "child, you have taken those bronze medals from Elder brother Zhao Xu, he is our elder and your mother doesn't want to take it from them so return it!"

Shi Potian listened with great amazement and said: "mother? mother?"

He took out the bronze medals from his bosom and returned it to Zhao Xu. He thought aloud and said: "youyou are my mother?"

Tian Xu sighed and said to Shi Qing and Min Rou: "Younger brother, Younger sister, I will say goodbye now."

He knew that hereafter they won't have the opportunity to meet again so he didn't say "we will meet again". The rest of Taoist too said their goodbye and left

Chapter 13 - Parental Love

Shi Potian was continuously looking at Min Rou, his mind was filled with all sort of suspicion.

Her eyes were filled with tears and at the same time she said with a smile: "silly child, youYou have not recognized your father and mother?"

She stretched out her arms and hugged him. Shi Potian knew little about human affairs but a few people have shown him any kind of kindness, his heart filled with warmness, he hadn't felt anything like this before. He did not know what to say, thought for half of the day, only then said: "hemaster Shi is my father? I did not know. HoweverHoweverYou are not my mother, I am still looking for my mother."

Min Rou listens to him not recognizing her, she felt really sad in her heart, more tears fell from her eyes she said: "poor child, this is no wonder.....we are separated for so many years, you can still remember you father but can't remember your mother.

When you left the Xuan Su manor, the top of your head only came up to your mother's chest, now you might be almost as tall as your father. Your facial appearance has also changed over these years. In the temple of village god if we had not seen you captured by Bai Wanjian even we might have some difficulty to recognize you."

Shi Potian listened to her talking, but he remembered her mother's swollen face, her short stature, on the other hand Min Rou's face was a lot different from her. How can he make such a mistake?

He spoke haltingly: "Madam Shi, you are mistaken, III am not your son!"

Min Rou turned toward Shi Qing and cannot restrain herself. Tears flowing copiously, she trembled and said: "Senior brother, you look at this child"

As soon as Shi Qing heard Shi Potian not recognizing his own parents, he thought: "this child is really crafty, he is not recognizing his parents, surely there is some deep meaning in it. Is it possible that after he had done all kinds of evil

things in the Snow mountain sect and as the chief of "clan of eternal happiness", he feels discredited and didn't want to his parents to recognize him? Does he fear that we might punish him or he fears that he might implicate his parents?"

He asked: "Then you are chief of "clan of eternal happiness" Shi bangzhu?"

Shi Potian said: "everybody said that I am Shi Bangzhu, actually I not. They are all mistaken."

Shi Qing asked: "then what is your name?"

Shi Potian was at loss, his complexion changed still he said: "I don't know. My mother used to call me bastard."

Shi Qing and Min Rou glanced at each other, saw Shi Potian saying everything sincerely and it didn't looked as if he was trying to deceive them intentionally.

Shi Qing signals with his eyes towards Min Rou, both people went out ten steps. Shi Qing said in a low voice: "is this child our son? We only got information that our son has become the chief of "clan of eternal happiness. Isn't this it stupid to think it might happen?"

Min Rou sobs and said: "Our son left his parents about ten years ago, in that time a child can age in a big way, the facial expression is ever changing, butbutI recognized that he is my son."

Shi Qing hesitated and said: "In your heart, you have no doubt?"

Min Rou said: "I do have my suspicions, but how I don't know. I believe.....he is our child. What's the truth, I actually cannot tell."

Shi Qing thinks of some incident suddenly, said: "Younger sister ..that ...that lowly person came to harm you the same day that day"

This was Shi couple's lifetime matter of regret. Both people do not forget it frequently but actually were never willing to mention it.

Shi Qing said to her but he kept looking downwards, no longer looking at her.

Min Rou came to her senses immediately, said: "good, I will say to him."

She came to Shi Potian, sat at a stone nearby and said to Shi Potian: "child come hear, I have to speak with you."

Shi Potian came near her and sat beside her on the stone.

She said: "child, that year you had just turned a year old, a female thief came to harm your mother. Your father was not at the home; your mother had given birth to your younger brother and didn't have the strength to fight her.

That female thief was very wicked, not only she wanted to kill your mother, but also you and your younger brother."

Shi Potian said: "to kill me?"

He laughed in spite of trying not to and immediately said: "I am really confused, then how am I alive."

Min Rou didn't smile, and continued saying: "I was holding you in my left hand and holding sword in right, desperately trying to fight her, her martial-arts were extremely good. At that critical moment, your father came back. That female thief threw out three darts, two pounded to your mother but the third actually hit on yours small buttocks.

I was really weary and fainted there only but that female thief saw your father and ran away, unexpectedly her heart was really ruthless, she ran away conveniently holding your younger brother in her hand. Your father was busy rescuing me, also feared that she might have some secret helper waiting to seize the opportunity to harm me so he didn't dare to pursue far.

He thought that female thief.....That female thief will not harm his son, but has only taken their son to scare them, but unexpectedly within three days that female thief has delivered your younger brother's corpse, in the pit of the stomach were inserted two swords. One a black sword and other white sword, on the sword were engraved your father and your mother's name"

As she said these words, she started crying.

Shi Potian heard her words and filled with righteous indignation, got angry and said: "this female thief is seriously hateful, what does a young child understands? If I had these poisonous hands then actually could have killed her with one strike, otherwise I would have a younger brother. Madame Shi, this matter my mother never told me."

Min Rou was still crying, she said: "child, have you really forgotten your own

mother? II am your mother."

Shi Potian stared at her face, shook his head slowly, and said: "No... You are mistaking me for someone else."

Min Rou said: "that day this female thief has hit a dart on your left buttock, although you have grown up, but that dart mark would be still there, so can you loosen a your trousers so I can have look."

Shi Potian said: "II"

He remembered that he got his nipped shoulder by Ding dang and had a scar.

He also remembered he got a scar on his leg when he was wounded by Snow mountain sect disciple Liao (although he didn't remember it himself) when he executed the move "six snowflake", but these happened long ago, he even forgot those. He didn't knew any scar on his back, when Madam Shi said that she wanted to check his buttocks for scar marks, he didn't know if there ever was mark in there or not.

He puts out a hand to separate the clothes to trace his left buttock and check if there is trace of any scar. He was really confused about this entire situation and was hesitant to drop his trouser in front of Madam Shi

Min Rou said with a smile: "I am your own mother, don't you know how many times I have cleaned your excrement and soiled cloths when you were a child. What are you afraid of? Good, Let your father go and have a look at you."

As she was saying she moved away several steps from him.

Shi Qing said: "Child, now loosens your pants and let me have a look."

Shi Potian had already feeling for scars and didn't felt any of it. He untied the belt, slipped off the pants, turned his head to look, he only saw above the left buttock pointed scars. It was on the light side and not so obvious. At once, in his heart he was panic-stricken, he felt as though his entire world is revolving, as if suddenly he had turned in to another person, but actually did not know when. He cried out loudly.

Min Rou turns around hurriedly. Shi Qing nodded to her and said: "he is really our son."

Min Rou was really happy at the same time tears flowing from her eyes, she snatched him to her side, hugs him and burst into tears, said: "son, my son, don't fear, I know it's a huge matter but your mother and father are here to take responsibility to you."

Shi Potian cried loudly and said: "what past matter, I hadn't done anything. I did not know that you are my mother, did not know that he is my father, did not know that I have scars on my buttocks. I did not know anything"

Shi Qing said: "you have this profound internal energy, where have you learnt it?"

Shi Potian shook his head and said: "I do not know."

Shi Qing again asked: "this poisonous palm of yours, how did you get it, who had taught you this?"

Shi Potian stammered and said: "nobody taught mehow? Am I really Shi Potian? Shi Bangzhu? Shi...shi...am I surnamed Shi, am I your son?"

He was frightened and confused, he had held his trousers by his hand, and for a moment he forgot that he hasn't yet tied the belt and left it. His trouser fell down to his knees.

Both the Shi couple saw his frightened appearance. Min Rou was filled with sympathy and caressed the top of his head lightly and said gently: "son, do not fear, do not fear about it!"

All these years Shi Qing was really angry with his son but when he saw him in this state he threw aside all his hate and anger and thought: "I once saw some person got hit on his head, received a serious injury, afterwards when he recovered he got this big sickness, he forgot completely about his past, heard that it is called 'the soul sickness '. It is extremely difficult to restore the memory.....Has our son contracted this illness?"

In his heart he had these thoughts but didn't dare to mention it to his wife for a while, unexpectedly Min Rou actually was also thinking about same.

The couple looked at each other and blurted out as though by prior agreement: 'the soul sickness'!"

Shi Qing knew a bit about the person who suffered from this kind of illness, if people keep on urging him to remember things than instead the person goes in to deep mental trauma. Only if things are told one by one, gradually the person starts to remember the forgotten things over a period of time.

He immediately said in a very gentle voice: "Today all of us are having a reunion after such a long time. It's a matter of happiness, child, you must be hungry, why don't we get some food and eat."

Shi Potian was still scared witless, asks: "IWho am I?"

Min Rou puts out a hand to his waist, tied the belt, and said kindly: "child, you shouldn't try to think too much about past, do you will feel any pain in your head? Had you sustained any injury on your head earlier?"

Shi Potian shook his head and said: "no...Don't have any head injury."

Min Rou asked: "then in these years, had you suffered any serious illness? Has gotten a high fever?"

Shi Potian said: "Yes! Several months ago, my whole body had very high fever, earlier it seemed ad though I was roasting in a big stove, afterward the whole body felt cold, that dayThat day, I fainted in the barren hill, and henceforth I don't remember anything."

Shi Qing got the answer to his question and he though that illness might be the reason of this memory loss. In his heart he happy at least he knew what's going on.

Min Rou said to him slowly: "child, you do not fear, you had a severe illness and high fever that's why you have forgotten all about the past."

Shi Potian was half believing and half doubting, he asked: "then you are really my mother, ShiManor master Shi is my father?"

Min Rou said: "Yes child, he is your father. He and I were looking for you everywhere, today the heaven pities me, and let our entire family meet.

Youyou haven't called him yet father?"

Shi Potian deeply believed that Min Rou will not deceive him in any way. He also originally hadn't met his father, he hesitated slightly but then called out to

Shi Qing: "father!"

Shi Qing smiled and said: "child, now call her mother."

He wanted to call Min Rou her mother but it was much more difficult. He remembered clearly, his own mother's facial expression and Min Rou were completely different. Now several years has passed on, by now her hair might be already grayish white, unlike Min Rou's silky hair. His mother was crueller, often will yawn and then scold him, puts out a hand to hit him, on the other hand Min Rou was such polite and gentle but when he saw the face of Min Rou, a look of hope on her face that he will call her mother, she had waited for this meeting with her son for such a long time, her eyes were already red. He cannot help to look at her and called out in a low voice: "mother!"

Min Rou was extremely happy. She puts out her hand to hug him and called out: "good child, clever son!" beads of tear flowing from her eyes.

Shi Qing also had his eyes moist, he thought: "Depending on this child deeds in Snow mountain sect and clan of eternal happiness, I will be damned, how can one say "good child, clever son"?"

He has suffered a lot from this sickness and we meeting after such a long time suddenly a phrase came to his mind "return of the prodigal son". We will teach him well in the future, perhaps then he will repent for his misdeeds. He was far away from his parents since childhood; I never had opportunity to give him some pointers. He had ruined the name of Xuan Su manor, I hope now he can resurrect it again in the realm of rivers and lakes.

He felt as though he was happy and sad at the same time.

Min Rou saw her husband's complexion and understood his concern. She feared that he might ask her son regarding those misdeeds and said: "senior brother, son, I am very hungry, come lets look for some food."

Shi Qing whistled and the white-black pair of horses rushed towards them.

Min Rou said with a smile: "child, let's ride this white horse together with your mother."

Shi Qing saw his wife looking really happy after all those years. He too smiled faintly and leapt to sit on the black horse. Shi Potian and Min Rou rode on white

horse and took the main road.

Shi Potian was full of suspicions and thought: "is she is really my mother? Then who raised me since childhood, isn't she my mother?"

All three people rode the two horses for several miles. They saw a small temple nearby.

Min Rou said: "we should go to this temple to pay our respects to Bodhisattva."

She came down from her horse and entered the temple. Shi Qing and Shi Potian also followed her in the temple. Shi Qing knew for some time that her wife didn't believed Buddha. He actually saw her entering Buddhist temple hall and kowtowing in front of Tathagata image of Lord Buddha, he turned his head to look towards Shi Potian.

In his heart he felt a sense of gratitude towards him and thought: "this child, although he is unfillial, had committed evil acts, but still I like him a lot even more than my own life. If some people try to injure him, I will give up my life to save him.

Today we father and son are reunited, Bodhisattva has blessed us, and I am really grateful and pay my respect."

He too kowtowed in front of the Bodhisattva.

Shi Potian stood in one side, he heard Min Rou praying in a very low voice: "Tathagata Buddha blesses us, I hope my son recovers from his illness soon, he is ignorant, for whatever sins he had done, give its punishment to her mother, I am ready to withstand it. Even if I am cut to pieces I will endure it willingly but just ask my son to turn over a new leaf from now on, his life does not have to be a disaster now on and should be safe and pleasant."

Min Rou prayed in extremely low voice, her lips barely moved but Shi Potian has extremely good internal energy so he was able to hear it clearly. He was able to hear her clearly, each character said in a very refined language and with utmost sincerity. As he heard his heart filled with warmth, he immediately thought: "she, if not for my own mother, who else will pray something like that in front of god and I was not willing to call her mother. This is really such a

mess."

Excitedly he went forward and threw his arms towards Min Rou to hug her and called out: "mother! Mother! You are really my mother."

Earlier when he called her mother it looked as he was reluctant but this time when he called her as though he was crying out with his innermost feelings.

Min Rou reached behind his back to grasp him, called out: "my cruel fated child!"

Shi Potian remembered how he lived his childhood in that barren hill with her mother for more than ten years. Although it wasn't that good still both the mother and child have been bound by a common destiny for that many years.

He could not restrain himself from asking: "what about my previous mother? Was....was she deceiving me?"

Min Rou caressed his hair, said: "what previous mother are you talking about...do you remember something from your past."

Shi Potian said: "sheHer hair has been somewhat white, has been shorter than yours. He didn't now much martial-art, but she was often angry, often used to hit me and called me names."

Min Rou asked: "she said that she is your mother, and also called you 'son'?"

Shi Potian said: "No, she used to call me bastard!"

As they heard it Shi Qing and Min Rou got anxious.

Min Rou said: "this woman used to call our son bastard. This means that she hated us husband and wife, is it possible thatIs it possible she is that woman?"

Min Rou said: "Is that woman had a oval face, her skin is white, the facial expression is very beautiful, when she smiles there is dimple on her face?"

Shi Potian shook his head and said: "No ... my mother's cheek are fat, somewhat yellow, somewhat black, she keeps a long face entire day and rarely smiles. What is a dimple?"

Min Rou said in a soft voice: "No, she not that woman. Child, that day in the

temple of village god your mother was not careful and stabbed you by mistake. What kind of injury you had?"

Shi Potian said: "That injury was very light, it went away in a few days."

Min Rou asked: "how do you escaped from the hands of Bai Wanjian? Our child is seriously amazing; he got better of that 'frost of the north-west' Bai Wanjian."

As Shi Qing heard these words he felt extremely proud. Shi Qing and bai Wanjian has fought about thousand moves in that temple of village god so he knew he was extremely capable swordsman.

He approved her words still he only said: "too do not praise the child, you have spoiled him enough."

Shi Potian said: "It is not that I ran away but Grandpa Ding Busan and Ding dang saved me that day."

The Shi couple knew about the bad reputation of Ding Busan. He coldly asked about the details.

Shi Potian immediately told them the entire story from beginning to end, how Ding Busan and Ding dang saved him and then how Ding Busan threatened to kill him and Ding dang taught him the Ding family's seizing techniques, Then how he was thrown in to another boat.

Min Rou asked in reply about the antecedent. Shi Potian then recounted how he bowed to heaven and earth with Ding Dang, he was captured by Bai Wanjian in the clan of eternal happiness. He also told how he met A'Xiu and Grandma Shi on that boat in Yangtze River, how he contested with Ding Busi and then later landed on Azure Mist island.

He told them he became the disciple of Golden phoenix sect and his fight with Bai Wanjian. Afterwards he told them about that ship full of corpses of flying fish sect, how he swore brotherhood with those two people and what happened in the main hall of Iron Fork sect and finally how he entered Shan Qing temple to steal food and listened them. He ran into numerous people in the martial-arts world in these last few days. He told them about everyone obviously in a disorderly manner, but Shi Qing and Min Rou interrogated him item by item and

understood finally. The couple were more and more astonished.

They asked him how he arrived at the clan of eternal happiness.

Shi Potian then recounted how he practiced martial-arts on the skyscraping cliff. He then recounted past events of how she presented him as a gift some silvers in the past in cake shop in Outer Mongolia. How they came on their black and white horses.

The couple could not believe that in the past in Hou Jianji the child they saw that dirty young beggar unexpectedly was their son. Min Rou recalled this young beggar and also one felt really sad.

Shi Qing thought: "on time date calculation, when we met in Hou Jianji, it was precisely the time when this child ran away from Snow mountain sect. How is it that Geng Wanzhong didn't recognize him?"

He looked carefully at the appearance of Shi Potian and tried to remember how he looked when he saw him in Hou Jianji. He did remember he saw that young beggar but after that his memory was really fuzzy. He only remembered that he was wearing some rags, his dirty face and thought: "After he ran away from Snow mountain sect he might have been intentionally begging for food and changed his appearance to a dirty beggar, so that Geng Wanzhong and others can't recognize him. We husband and wife had not seen him for some years but those people had just seen him recently, still they didn't managed to recognize. This boy is really good."

He asked: "that day outside the cake shop, you saw your teacher's younger brother Geng Wanzhong and others, didn't you felt afraid in your heart that they will seize you?"

Min Rou was not willing that her husband should raise the matter of snow mountain sect but he had already mentioned it so she couldn't do anything now. Her delicate eyebrows pressed slightly, she feared that Shi Qing might be stern with him and will start interrogating him about that matter.

Shi Potian said: "Geng Wanzhong? They are seriously my teacher's younger brother? I did not know at that time that they were looking for me obviously I didn't fear them."

Shi Qing asked: "you did not know at that time they were there to seize you? YouYou did not know that Geng Wanzhong is your teacher's younger brother?"

Shi Potian shook his head said: "I didn't know!"

Min Rou saw the change in the complexion of her husband. She knew that he was trying to suppress his anger and in fact he was really angry.

She said quickly: "child, to err is human?"

It's the greatest trait of human to recognize his mistake and try to change it. Whatever happened in the past is now done; it won't correct the things if you try to hide it. Father and mother both like you lot and will help you to start a new life, you should not conceal anything and should tell everything truthfully.

Shi Potian remembered that once he listened to his father and Bai Wanjian talking in temple of village god.

He said: "Are you talking about 'Dragon of wind and fire' Feng Wanli? I heard you talking to master Bai Wanjian about him but I have not seen him."

Shi Qing and Min Rou looked at each other, Shi Qing asked: "Grandpa Bai? His temperament is hot tempered, isn't?"

Shi Potian shook his head and said: "I do not know any Grandpa Bai, has not seen him."

Shi Qing and Min Rou asked him about the Lingxiao city and Snow mountain sect. Shi Potian unexpectedly did not know anything about it.

Min Rou said: "senior brother, so he had this sickness since then."

Shi Qing nodded and kept silent. Both people understood that when he ran away from Snow mountain sect then only he lost his memory. They couldn't guess the reason maybe excessive fear or some injury but he had forgotten about the past events. He said that he got that high fever in the skyscraping cliff and clan of eternal happiness but the actual illness got him several years ago."

Min Rou asked him about his childhood, Shi Potian kept on repeating that over and over again, how he used to go for hunting in the barren hill and caught games, how he used to roam with his dog, but couldn't tell any thing more about

where he actually came from and where he was born. It was already several years and he didn't remember much.

Shi Qing asked: "Child, This matter is very important, your life and death depends on it. How much Snow mountain sect martial-arts do you know?"

Shi Potian said in a dull voice: "When I was in the temple of village god, I saw them practicing their sword skill, in my heart I remembered some. They were really angry to me and wanted to kill me? Father, that master Bai Wanjian asserted that I am a snow mountain disciple. He even show a scar on my leg actually of snow mountain sword skill!"

Shi Qing said to his wife: "Younger sister, I will test his sword skill again using Snow mountain sword skill."

He drew out his sword and said: "you also use the snow mountain sword skill and don't conceal anything with your father."

Min Rou gave her sword to Shi Potian; faintly smiled at him. Shi Qing stabbed at him slowly as soon as Shi Potian lifted his sword to keep him off, which made Shi Potian to use the Snow mountain sword move "north wind gets up suddenly", his sword move was full of numerous flaws.

Shi Qing wrinkled his eyebrows, moved his sword to make another move and said: "your move is very good!"

Shi Potian said: "really!"

He slanted his sword and made a move from the Golden phoenix sword skill. Obviously it was not Snow Mountain sect's sword skill but it was attacking at his strategic point.

Shi Qing quickly changed his move and thought: "this child is really smart, also gave up the idea that he is hiding anything from his, a person facing a crucial moment in fight can not fake his sword skill."

For each of his move Shi Potian attacked on the strategic point of his body. Shi Qing somehow managed to stay out of trouble. Golden phoenix sect's sword skill was made to negate the snow mountain sect. Whatever move Shi Qing started Shi Potian naturally had a counter move for it.

Shi Potian knew that this was just a tactical fight so he was not using any internal energy. If he was using the Golden phoenix sword skill with his full internal energy then Shi Qing was no match for him. Even if he was using his sword skill properly still Shi Qing was no match to him, he could have stabbed his chest in the 11th move, on the 23rd move he spared his head when a horizontal swipe could have easily done the job. On the 28th move, Shi Potian had the opportunity to attack his lower abdomen, his left shoulder and his right leg, all were exposed. Shi Qing looked at his wife, shook his head and stabbed at the lower abdomen of Shi Potian with his sword.

Shi Potian was thrown into confusion, he brandished his sword randomly, suddenly with a loud sound both the sword collided and the sword flew out of the hand of Shi Qing immediately. He felt a blockage in his chest and just couldn't manage to breathe. Shi Qing drew back immediately about four five steps and couldn't manage to stand.

Shi Potian called out: "father! You.....You ...how?"

He dropped out his sword and moved forward to support him. Shi Qing felt dizzy; he stopped breathing hurriedly, waved his hands to stop Shi Potian coming towards him and to move away. Originally Shi Potian and Shi Qing were not competing very violently and also Si Qing had good internal energy but the moment Shi Qing got confused and started to brandish his sword, he sent out the vicious poison with it too.

Shi Qing understood the reason pretty quickly so he moved away and stopped his breathing, fortunately he didn't fainted by that poisonous gas and but felt dizziness.

Min Rou really cared about the husband, she went forward to support him, turns her head to Shi Potian and said: "Your father was just testing your martial-arts, why are you so tactless and tried to hurt him?"

Shi Potian was really terrified, he said: "father, itit is not good! YouYou have not been injured?"

Shi Qing saw him really concerned about him, felt very happy, smiled faintly and took a breath and said : "Younger sister, you cannot blame him, he has really not learnt any Snow mountain sword skill. He was not impolite to me, it's just

that his internal energy is really strong, In martial arts world, there are not many people who can match him."

Min Rou knew that her husband was a real gentleman and his knowledge in martial-arts was really high. When she heard him praising their son, she cannot help to restrain her smile, said: "but his martial-art is also too unfamiliar, it looks he had learnt something from his father."

Shi Qing said with a smile: "you have already taught him in that temple of village god, looks like you instructed your mischievous son really well, even his father is inferior to his loving mother."

Min Rou laughed and said: "fine, come lets eat, I am hungry."

All three people started eating food, Min Rou really enjoyed eating with her family and even made an exception and unexpectedly ate a full bowl.

After eating the food they arrived at a desolate place within mountains. Shi Qing wanted to instruct Shi Potian about sword skill so he took out his sword and asked him listen and watch. It had been quite some time when Shi Potian was taught by a master.

Shi Qing was a top martial-art veteran and had comprehensive knowledge of various martial-art skills. As soon as she started to give instruction Shi Potian immediately started to understand. Although Grandma Shi taught him in person but still she was there for a very short period. After teaching 73 moves of Golden phoenix sword skill, she went away even without saying good-bye.

He didn't have time to get the detailed directions about various moves from her like Shi Qing. Apart from that the sword skills of Golden phoenix sect were precisely to restraint snow mountain sect sword skill and she taught it him with that mindset. Also Shi Qing didn't learn anything apart from sword skills from her.

The Shi couple saw him using Snow mountain sect's sword skill, observed the flaw in his strategic move, they noticed it but kept silent and compared it to the same day when he was sparring with Min Rou in the temple of village god and she taught him some moves. They were exactly same but much quicker. Shi Potian felt some doubts about a move and asked them immediately.

Both of them listened him asking about a very shallow move and didn't understand. Shi Potian told them that this move was used by Bai Wanjian in their fight on Azure Mist Island. Actually these were the same sets of moves used in training martial-arts which Shi Potian didn't understood and lost the fight. When they learnt that so called master was so mean spirited and used this stupid move to defeat him, got extremely angry.

Shi Potian had strong internal energy; he kept on practicing from afternoon to night without any break, not even a slightest fatigue, even after such a long time his face didn't turned red and was not breathing quickly. Both of them took turns to instruct him some moves and when got tired switched between themselves.

His ability to learn martial-art was really good and soon he made rapid progress. Both his parents saw his felt extremely proud to him learning so fast.

In these last six seven days, both Si Qing and Min Rou apart from eating and resting always enticed Shi Potian to recount the past events, hoped that it might help him to restore his memory, but Shi Potian was not able to remember anything new. In fact he remembered everything after he escaped from clan of eternal happiness; even the minor details but he had the same information about his childhood and no information about Snow mountain sect and LingXiao city.

That day in the afternoon, after all three people have eaten meal, they arrived near a willow tree to sit and chat. Min Rou picked up a small branch and wrote on the ground "Black and white clearly demarcated" these four characters and asked: "son, you remember these four characters?"

Shi Potian shook his head and said: "I am not literate."

Both of Shi couple were shocked, when as child he left home, Min Rou had taught him, he knew "the three classics", the Tang poems and so on.

How can he say "I am not literate" these words?

These "Black and white clearly demarcated" four characters were written on a large plaque in the main hall in Xuan Su Manor, written by a famous elder from martial-arts world. These words and the black and white double sword were their identity in the martial-art world and depicted the reputation of both

husband and wife to uphold and to promote justice.

In the past when their son was four years old, Min Rou hugged him in her bosom and looked at the big plaque and taught him these four characters. Even at that time Shi Potian recognized these letters and the Shi couple approved him to be intelligent.

At this moment she writes these four characters, and hoped that he can recall the past events but saw that unexpectedly he can't remember something he knew when he was four years old.

She used the branch to immediately write the "one" character, smiled and asked: "at least you remember this character?"

Shi Potian said: "I don't know any characters, nobody ever taught me."

Min Rou felt extremely sad and tears rolled in from her eyes.

Shi Qing said: "Son, don't worry rest or some time."

Shi Potian said yes but actually took the sword and started practicing the sword moves.

Shi Qing urged to his wife saying: "Younger sister, this illness of our son is really deep, you can't expect him to remember everything in a day."

He also said: "Even if he had forgotten all about the past deeds but actually I see a change in his personality.

Earlier he was a lot careless and willful however now at this moment he is a littlea little mixed up in his mind but is actually much steady and calm. He had improved a lot."

As soon as Min Rou thought about these words of her husband, she in fact felt better and happy. She thought: "what if my son is illiterate? I can again teach him from the start."

She remembered how much she has suffered for her child in past years and cannot help but shivered in her heart, although this moment he was already grown up but in her heart, her son was naïve and weak, right now ignorant but still very lovable.

Shi Qing said: "There are some matters I don't understand. This child's amnesia

started about the time he left the Lingxiao city and Snow mountain sect and afterwards with that high fever his condition deteriorated but still I think something ...but ...but"

Min Rou listens to her husband to say these words in deep sorrow; she too was unable to restrain her worry and asked: "what have you thought of?"

Shi Qing said: "Our son doesn't know a single character, his martial-arts is also not extraordinary apart from his strong internal energy, speaking of the position and reputation of clan of eternal happiness his manners or intelligence to hold the position of chief. The clan of eternal happiness has risen in past eight nine years, how could"

Min Rou nodded and said: "How can he become the chief of such a sect?"

Shi Qing hesitated and said: "That day when we met Hero Lu Dong San in Xuzhou, he told us that clan of eternal happiness was created by that person called chief Situ and whatever it looks from outside but 'bring back dead to life' Bei Haishi was helping him. He didn't know what happened that suddenly this young person was made the chief.

Hero Lu Dong San also said that this youth is really lascivious in nature and is extremely crafty and sly in his affairs, his martial-arts is also really good but nobody actually know his origin.

Afterwards that female disciple of Snow Mountain sect, Hua Wanzi went to investigate this matter and admitted that she recognized Shi Potian and he is in fact Shi Zhongyu and then Bai Wanjian and rest of Snow mountain disciple visited clan of eternal happiness. At this moment it looked like 'handles affairs in martial-arts cunningly', these character really suited him."

Min Rou tightened her eyebrows and said: "although at that time we thought our Yu'er was young but his scheming is really fierce, his martial-arts is really strong and he did all this to get away from Snow mountain sect, but his this appearance"

He took a deep breath, waited for a moment and suddenly said: "senior brother, there is certainly some conspiracy. You too thought that 'bring back dead to life' Bei Haishi such an astute and competent person why will he assist someone so young....." as she spoke, in her heart she felt afraid and her voice

shivered.

Shi Qing folded his hand behind his back and started pacing around the willow tree, in between he was talking to himself: "clan of eternal happiness has made this young child there chief, for what? For what?"

By the time he was making fifth round, in his heart he already got knew what is behind all this, he was not able to digest it and felt extremely fearful and actually did not dare to say anything.

On his seventh round he looked at Min Rou, saw her looking at him. Both people looked at each other and both their eyes betrayed the fear in their hearts.

The couple looked at each other for some time and then simultaneously said: "Command of reward and punishment!"

Both these people said the same four characters together and made loud sound. Shi Potian was practicing at a distant place, still he heard so he approached both of them and asked: "father, mother, what is this 'Command of reward and punishment'? Are they really so bad and wicked? I listened about them in Iron fork sect meeting and also in the Shan Qing temple; the Taoists mentioned it several times."

Shi Qing didn't answer him immediately and asked him: "Those people Zhang San and Li Si, you swore brotherhood with, did they knew that you are the chief of clan of eternal happiness?"

Shi Potian said: "they had not raised this matter so I didn't tell them."

Shi Qing said: "they and you betted on drinking that poisoned wine, how? Tell me in detail about it."

Shi Potian told them: "that was poisoned wine? How haven't I been poisoned?"

He then told how he met Zhang San and Li Si, how they ate meat and drank wine and so on, from the beginning to end in detail.

After Shi Qing heard him he hesitated for half of the day, only then said: "Yu'er, there are some matter which you don't understand, I will tell you so do not get

afraid." He continued and said: "Thirty years ago, in the martial arts world many big schools and big sect's heads received an invitation from Island of heroes in South China sea to eat 'Eight meat gruel' on eighth of the twelfth month."

Shi Potian nodded and said: "yes, as soon as everybody hears about eating 'eight meat gruel' they get afraid. I did not know that was the truth? This 'eight meat gruel' is this extremely poisonous?"

Shi Qing said: "that nobody knows. These big schools, the big sect's heads received the bronze medal invitation"

Shi Potian interrupted to ask: "bronze medal invitation? Is that two bronze medals?"

Shi Qing said: "good, now you know about the bronze medals you took from Elder brother when he was unconscious. One has a sign engraving of a smiling face, that is 'reward' meaning friendly; On another sign is a angry facial features, that is 'punishes wickedly'. These were delivered by two thin young people."

Shi Potian said: "young?" He had guessed correctly that Shi Qing was talking about Zhang San and Li Si but he said young people.

Shi Qing said: "that was thirty years ago, obviously they were young at that time. Various schools and sect's heads receive those people and the person of the bronze medal invitation and agreed to go to Island of heroes otherwise his school or sect's was in imminent danger, whichever school or sect refused the invitation faced something really terrible.

The head of Qingcheng sect from western Sichuan, Taoist priest Renxu Shan received the medals, smiled at it and took the two bronze medals in the hand and utilized his internal energy to melt the two bronze medals in to one. He actually thought that he will show off his internal strength to frighten these two young fellows.

Who would have thought that just as he just pinched to destroy the bronze medals, these two youth struck with their four palms suddenly, strikes on his chest and immediately this master of Qingcheng sect died in a single strike!"

Shi Potian said: "Ahhh...so vicious!"

Shi Qing said: "the Qingcheng sect disciples rallied to attack on them, at that

time these two young people martial-art was not at its peak, they snatched two swords immediately and killed three Taoist priests in a flash and ran away saying what kind of a people are in Qingcheng sect, what is the fame of the Taoist priest Renxu Shan, two nameless youth visited this place killed him and returned back. Within a half month this news spread like fire in the entire martial arts world.

Twenty days later, in west Yuzhou, a Sichuan escort house had given a big banquet and was celebrating for Old Master Diao Biaotou turning sixty years old, there were numerous guests. These two youths came there to hands over the bronze medal. Audiences were celebrating with the guest and were actually discussing this matter originally, as soon as they saw him; the public moved towards them in indignation, everybody went forward to besiege them. Unexpectedly these two youths calmly escaped.

Three days later, in that Sichuan escort house, there was no one alive in that escort office, the old master Diao Biaotou, the escorts....everyone, all thirty people died a violent death, they didn't only killed them but also in addition the old and the weak women and children. On the escort office's front door, two bronze medals were nailed."

Shi Potian sighed and said: "I also saw two bronze medals nailed on the cabin door of that corpse ship which had flying fish sect people's corpses on it, could not thinkCould not think that unexpectedly Yama had sent its envoys to them."

*Yama – king of hell (normally he sends Yamdoots ...his envoys to take life, this is Indian mythology...don't know what the Chinese say)

Shi Qing said: "as soon as news of this matter spread in the martial-arts world, everybody went to go to ask Shaolin temple to send Head abbot master Fang Zhang to take the lead to cope with them.

When they arrived at Shaolin Temple, the Buddhist priest said that abbot master had gone out and had not returned.

Everybody then went to Mount Wudang, looking for Wudang sect to send their Head Taoist priest Yu Cha, unexpectedly the Taoist priests in the Wudang were also distressed, they too also said that their Master had left unobserved.

As soon as the people thought it over, they understood that two of the present

age martial arts world's top experts are suddenly missing. If they are not hit by violent treachery of the envoys of Island of heroes, then definitely they are hiding to evade the calamity.

Immediately they looked for Elder Shan Ben of Mount Wutai and Taoist priest Ku Bai of Kunlun sect to invite the martial-arts world, each big school heads and discuss a plan to cope with these envoys and simultaneously look for the messenger's whereabouts.

But these two messengers mysteriously appear and disappear, when opposite party were prepared, they could not find these people's shadow, but if they are even a bit negligent, then did not know what got them and people will find those bronze medals with their dead bodies.

These two people were good with the poison. When Elder Shan Ben and Taoist Ku Bai received the bronze medal, they destroyed it; at that time nothing happened but within a month successively caught a foul disease and died.

Only when people thought afterwards, then only they concluded that the martial-arts of Elder Shan Ben and Taoist Ku Bai was too high, so the two envoys of 'command of reward and punishment' used poison to kill as they couldn't have killed them in a fair fight. Those two bronze medals had extremely different kind of highly lethal poison, when Elder Shan Ben and Taoist Ku Bai touched the bronze medals with their hands, the violent poison got to their upper body and finally acted later and they died."

Shi Potian heard it and was absolutely terrified, he said: "I thought elder brother Zhang San and Li Si were righteous, unexpectedlyunexpectedly they are such vicious people? They are harming these many school and sect's head, but for what reason?"

Shi Qing shook his head and said: "for thirty years, no one is able to find answer to this important matter. Shaolin temple head abbot

Master Fang Zhang and Wudang sect Head Taoist priest Yu Cha are still missing, many years later the news leaked in the martial-art world that indeed the these two masters really accepted the invitation and went to Island of heroes.

Shaolin Temple had numerous skilled fighters who can fight for days. On top of

Mount Wudang there were too several fighters who were ready fight on single sign from Head Taoist priest Yu Cha.

Both these people were the best martial-arts experts in the realm of river and lakes and rarely met worthy opponents.

In addition to them the chief of Qingcheng sect Renxu Shan, Old master Diao Biaotou from west Sichuan escort house, Elder Shan Ben of Mount Wutai and Taoist priest Ku Bai of Kunlun sect were all other top martial arts world characters and all were either missing or dead. All these six senior masters have received the invitation from Island of heroes to eat 'Eight meat gruel'.

These two envoys usually said: 'your Excellency kindly consent your presence to Island of heroes, it will be a big honor for us, on so and so day of some month please meet us on Island of heroes to eat 'Eight meat gruel'. That way they killed at least fourteen heads of sects who didn't receive their invitation. In addition some thirty-seven people went to the feast on invitation. Of all those thirty-seven people, there is absolutely no trace of any of them or even any least bit of news."

Shi Potian said: "Island of heroes in the South China Sea... what place is this? Why not to call together a lot of people and try to rescue those thirty-seven people?"

Shi Qing said: "'Island of heroes' these three characters, everyone in the martial-art world have been looking for. The great sea navigator Old Yu hang too have never heard of it. Also no other person had ever heard of this place or island, looks like that there is really no such place or island, it is only those two youths talking nonsense. In past year after year, the juniors family member who experienced this calamity and several others have tried in vain but gradually it fades from the memory. Unexpectedly every ten years, these two bronze medal invitations again appear."

Next time they came after ten years; this time again they have hit big, only within ten days, three schools who have refused to accept invitation to feast, the old and the young several hundred people were killed cleanly.

On the realm of rivers and lakes several groups of people are trying to get them but no one was successful yet. Emei sect sent three elders who called together

thirty masters to ambush these two in the Henan; they were waiting at Red spear society for these two murderers to arrive.

From what I know these two envoys have unexpectedly avoided the red spear society, even did not step into the Henan Province boundary, but the bronze medal was still delivered everywhere else.

So long as one receives the bronze medal and complies to attend a meeting, his school or sect is safe, otherwise, no matter how you guard against them, they will always manage to wipe out the entire sect by violent treachery."

"That year in Heilongjiang; Sha Bangzhu too received the bronze medal. He at that time readily agreed, later he secretly informed the time and place from where he was supposed to embark to the Red spear society. That day thirty masters rushed at the appointed time, but when the time comes nobody was there to greet them."

"The people waited for several days, but actually got poisoned and started dying one after the one.

Sha Bangzhu got afraid, they all dispersed immediately, has not gotten to their home, on the road they then heard the news, not only his entire family is dead but also his entire sect has been exterminated by those two people. After this event, nobody dares to resist, receives the bronze medal, then tries to deceive them. That year altogether forty-eight people went by boat to proceed toward the Island of heroes and again no trace of any of them and also not a least bit of news. This is really the biggest catastrophe of martial-art world!"

Shi Potian just could not believe that but he himself had seen the flying fish sect people, all dead, numerous corpse in that ship Again he saw the entire Iron fork sect being annihilated, not only was he a witness but he only exterminated the iron fork sect people and have accidentally become a accomplice of Zhang San and Li Si.

Only listens to Shi Qing saying: "After another ten years passed, In Jiangxi, the Wuji sect received the first bronze medal invitation. One year ago, each big school and sect's head had already discussed and decided that if one won't enter the tiger's den, then won't catch the tiger. They made up their mind that whatever the outcome everyone will accept the invitation and go to Island of

heroes. If everybody works with one mind in a joint effort then they will definitely succeed.

The good and evil of the martial arts world all agreed to join hands against this public enemy. That year wherever they went to invite everyone accepted the bronze medal in one visit, and no one got injured. Altogether a total of fifty-three people received the invitation and all went to attend the meeting. These fifty-three heroic men, some of them had outstanding martial-art, some were excellent in strategies, after they went there was again no news or trace of them as though all of them vanished in thin air.

This Island of heroes is a calamity to the realm of river and lake.

All over the martial-art world, people are unexpectedly at a loss; fortunately the butcher arrives only each ten years. I have deep connection with Shan Qing temple. In the outside world, people actually use Xuan Su manor to identify us but your father and mother's martial-art is originated from Shan Qing temple. Although our elder brother's martial-art is high; but still lacks in comparison to these people.

In Shan Qing temple all the fellow-disciples and the apprentices still need him, but the martial-art of these Taoist is not good enough to....."

Shi Potian asks: "Do they fear Island of heroes?"

Shi Qing moved gently and his complexion changed slightly in an awkward color, he hesitated and said: "Elder brother Tian Xu and other senior fellow disciples usually stand aloof from the world and had become Taoist priest to devote to god, they do not admire this martial arts world originally and all the unwarranted reputation. But if said that they feared the island of heroes then it won't be wrong too, no matter what you are with numerical strength, in terms of martial-art skill these three characters 'island of heroes' will make even the bravest off all shiver. Who could have thought that Shan Qing temple has to conceal its strength to survive, actually it's really difficult to run away this way."

He sighed as he was saying these words.

Shi Potian asked: "father, mother, you went to head of Shan Qing temple to get those Bronze medals and you wanted to investigate this mystery of Island of heroes. In the past thirty years three batches of people with exceptional ability

and martial-art skills had left for that island and no one actually returned. This matter is extremely difficult to manage, why were you insisting on it?"

Shi Qing said: "Obviously it extremely difficult, but we have to face the difficulties and danger to help people overcome this situation. It was our duty to help Shan Qing temple and help them in time of crisis, otherwise how can we face ourselves...it's a matter of principle. I and your mothers thought that the God couldn't help these evil people all the times; ultimately there luck will run off. Your parent's martial-arts is nothing compared to Shaolin abbot Master Fan Zhang and Wudang head priest Yu Cha, certainly these people have very high martial-art skills, but evil cannot vanquish good for a long period of time. At the end good will prevail, perhaps God has chosen your parents to exterminate these people of Island of heroes."

As he spoke these words Min Rou looked at him and both have same thought in their minds, they thought: "we are willing to give up our life to do this important matter, but it actually for you. You were a crafty and evil person, lascivious in nature, defied and bullied your teachers and superiors. It is for you that we two people cannot show our face in the martial-art world and don't have the courage to see in the eyes of our friends and foes in the realm of rivers and lakes. That's why we want to go to Island of heroes, if we are not up to the task and fail and deliver our life for this cause it would be a great merit for the martial arts world. Perhaps they will think of us and no longer investigates your offense."

They wanted to save their son but obviously they couldn't tell these things to Shi Potian.

Shi Potian hesitated for half of a day, said suddenly: "So my sworn brothers Zhang San and Li Si are the envoys of Island of heroes who give the bronze medals and invite people to eat 'Eight meat gruel'?"

Shi Qing said: "certainly without doubt."

Shi Potian said: "But they are not the evil people, why were they willing to swear brotherhood with me?"

Shi Qing could not help to restrain himself, smiled and said: "At that time they fell for you're stupid talks and consented to swear brotherhood, somehow got

entangled and could dodge. I am sure they must have called false witnesses, you cannot take that seriously."

Shi Potian said: "what is false witness?"

Shi Qing said: "Zhang San and Li Si are not their actual name, in fact it is a fictitious name, and they would have said Zhang San will die and Li Si will rot in hell all those kind of things, but if the name is false then obviously all the rest of promises and event are void."

Shi Potian said: "so that's how it is!"

He remembers those two people and thought of them as evil people and was unable to restrain his sadness, but thought that its possible that his father's deductions are not incorrect.

He said: "Fine, next time when I will see them, I will ask them and confirm it."

Min Rou had kept silent by now, but she anxiously interrupted him and said: "Yu'er, if you see those people next time you should be extremely careful. These two people kill others without batting an eye, clearly they fight extremely skillfully, and are very good with strategies too, they can sneak attack, can use poison and are extremely ruthless and sinister."

Shi Qing said: "Yu'er, you must remember your mother's words. Let alone you are so upright honest, people hundred times smarter than you have met these two envoys and found it difficult running away from their violent treachery. Speaking of keeping guard, it is virtually impossible to guard against these two, as soon as you see them next time, should immediately make a move and kill them immediately, one who strikes the first blow has the advantage, even though you might manage to kill person, still it would be great service to the martial arts world to even get rid of one big evil."

Shi Potian said: "we swore brotherhood, they are my elder brothers, how can I kill those people."

Shi Qing sighed, he no longer said anything and thought that he wants his son to kill his sworn brothers; this kind of words cannot be said loudly.

Min Rou said with a smile: "senior brother, you said that my Yu'er is uprightly honest. Our child has seriously changed; anyway he was clever from his

childhood, isn't it?"

Shi Qing nodded, said: "Yes, he was clever, but then some people have been trying to use him to keep off the disaster and to help overcome difficulties. Yu'er, you may know that clan of eternal happiness were making you their chief, what was their intention?"

Shi Potian was originally not that stupid. It's only that he had his childhood with his mother in a out-of-the-way place on a barren hill. In his youth, thanks to Xie Yanke he was leaving again away from civilization on the skyscraping cliff, two people spoke rarely so he knew nothing about the worldly affairs and human sentiment.

At this moment when he listened to Shi Qing hinting about some matter and immediately realized, he said quickly: "they wanted me to be their chief so they can send me to the island of heroes, is it possible thatIs it possible that wants me to be the scapegoat?"

Shi Qing sighed and said: "Actually one should not judge people before knowing the entire truth, who can measure the heart of a person in the realm of rivers and lakes. But if not so, Clan of eternal happiness have numerous people with outstanding ability, how can they appoint a youth their chief, a person who is not even well versed in worldly affairs?"

I guess that Clan of eternal happiness has been quite prosperous in recent years, they might have calculated that this time they will be getting the bronze medal invitation from Island of heroes depending on their increasing reputation, they might have decided that they will receive the invitation but will instead look for a person from outside the sect of some unknown origin and will make him their chief, this way they will be able to survive these 'Command of reward and punishment'."

Shi Potian could not believe these and thought how it possible that people are unexpectedly so dangerous and vicious, but his father's thoughts too looked extremely fair and actually cannot help but believe him.

Min Rou also said: "Yu'er, the reputation of Clan of eternal happiness in the realm of rivers and lakes is not that good, although they insist that they had not done any evil but in fact they rely on their numerical advantage and superior skill

to rob people and even commit murders if people don't agree to support them.

Several people in the martial arts world really despise them. I think the actual chief of this sect is evil person and that's why they have planned to rope in you as their chief and get away from the trap of 'Command of reward punishment', actually they arranged this plot, it's not much of a surprise."

Shi Qing said: "To ask an outsider to take the fall is the most obvious thing they will do. Yu'er is actually the most appropriate candidate. He has forgotten about the past events, he is ignorant about these dangerous disturbances in the martial-art world. It only that they did not expected that this little boy is from Xuan Su manor and son of Shi Qing and Min Rou. It was wishful thinking but we won't let it happen."

As he was speaking he pressed the sword hilt, looks in the east direction, which was precisely the way to clan of eternal happiness."

Min Rou said: "It good that we already suspect their deceitful stratagem, but no need to worry about it yet. Yu'er has not yet received the bronze medal invitation, but senior brother what should we do now, what should be our next step?"

Shi Qing hesitated and said: "If we three people just go to Clan of eternal happiness and reveal this matter, not only they will get angry out of shame, maybe even resort to violence. We three people will be overwhelmed by sheer numbers; moreover several people in the martial arts world might make a testimony in their side, so again it will be difficult matter for Yu'er in future too."

Min Rou said: "South of Yangtze River, in Songjiang District, government officer silver halberd Elder brother Yang Guang loves to make friends and he is also our good friend. We should visit him and might ask him to come along with us to Clan of eternal happiness in official capacity, this way we can visit and pay out respects too."

Shi Qing said: "this idea is really good. In the area south of Yangtze river, we have several friends in the martial arts world too; at least they will give us husband and wife some face."

The personal connection of the Shi couple was extremely good in the martial arts world, for 20 years they were generous in aiding other people, faced

difficultly themselves to help other people overcome their difficulties, not only that they were always busy helping someone but never asked others for help for any matter. They were sure that if they need help, they will definitely find people to help them so they decided to leave for Songjiang

Chapter 14 - The Guan Dong School

The family immediately left in the southeast direction for Songjiang. On the road they arrived at a small town, it was getting late and dark so the three decided to stay overnight in some inn. The Shi couple stayed in a big spacious room and Shi Potian stayed in a small room near courtyard.

Min Rou treasured her son and originally wanted him to take a good room too but all the good room were already filled apart from one so he took the small room.

In the evening Shi Potian sat cross-legged on the bed and did some breathing exercise. He really felt extremely good as though some warm energy is flowing inside his entire body. He felt the fresh air on his skin and liked it, suddenly looked at his palm in the light of lamp. The red spot and the blue clouds were very vague. He did not know that those two bottle gourds of poisoned liquor; most of it has increased his internal energy even more and also as he was practicing hard recently, he was able to sweep-out most of the poison out of his body, in his heart he was overjoyed.

As he was resting in the night, he heard a tapping sound in the window suddenly. Shi Potian stood up and asked in a low voice: "who is there?"

He only heard again three tap on his window, this time when he heard the taps he understood, his heart thumped violently and he asked: "Is it Ding dang?"

He heard the voice of Ding Dang in a very low voice: "Obviously, who else are hoping for?"

Shi Potian heard the sound of the Ding dang, he felt very happy and at the same time he was also got alarmed, he didn't spoke for a while. He heard a slight sound as the window paper wore out, a finger came out from the extended window lattice, he put his ear firmly on the hole and heard Ding dang saying: "why don't you open the window?"

Shi Potian calmed himself as he feared that his parents might listen her voice and might get alarmed, he did not dare to make any noise, shoves open the window gently. Ding dang jumped inside quickly, as soon as she saw him, she

smiled and said: "Elder bother, do you think of me?"

Shi Potian said: "III"

Ding dang got angry and said: "good, you do not think me? You were only thinking that girl. You and that girl have bowed to heaven and earth and now you have taken a new bride."

Shi Potian said: "when have I bowed to heaven and earth with her?"

Ding dang said with smile: "I saw with my own eyes, who else will I rely on? Good, I do not blame you, you are romantic in nature, and actually I like it. That girl likes it too?"

Shi Potian said: "I did not see her, when I returned to the cave, could not find her again." He thought of A'Xiu and remembered her charming refined look, her loving meaningful glance, and hereafter actually didn't saw her again felt sad in heart.

As soon as she heard it Ding dang laughed and said: "Bodhisattva blesses us, I hope you never see her again ever...forever."

Shi Potian thought: "I must surely find A'Xiu again."

He couldn't say it in front of Ding dang so he immediately changed the topic and asked: "your grandfather? Is he good?"

Ding dang puts out her to turn him towards her and said in an angry voice: "you did not ask that I am good? Oh Devil!"

Originally Shi Potian was regulating the internal energy inside his body before she came; as soon as she caught him with her hands she felt a violent jolt in her hands.

Shi Potian said: "Ding dang listen, that day you threw me into the river, luckily I fell on that ship, or I would have drowned to death."

He immediately thought how he fell beside A'Xiu and both of them were sleeping together. He again got concerned about her and thought: "where has A'Xiu gone? Why didn't she wait for me?"

These days whenever he was practicing martial-arts, occasionally he remembered A'Xiu, her face suddenly flashes in his mind and he forgot

everything. In fact here was sitting with Ding dang still he was only thinking of A'Xiu and for a moment forgot that even Ding dang there or not.

Ding Dang said: "what I felt luckily on a ship? Obviously I threw you intentionally, don't tell me... you do not know that?"

Shi Potian felt ashamed and said: "In my heart I knew that you treat me well, what I meant to say butbut I was a bit confused about the situation."

As soon as Ding Dang heard that she smiled and said: "I and you are husband and wife, what are you confused about?"

Two people sit shoulder to shoulder in the side of the bed. Shi Potian smelled the light fragrance of orchid on the body of Ding dang; was unable to restrain himself and moved his hands but suddenly he thought of A'Xiu and felt that if she knew that I and Ding Dang are intimate then will certainly be angry."

Originally He stretched out his right arm to hug Ding dang but then he retracted them before touching her.

Ding Dang said: "Elder brother, you tell me honestly, what is it? Is your new wife is more attractive?"

Shi Potian said: "what new wife are you talking about? Only youOnly you are my wife." As he was saying this he sighed and thought: "I am willing to give my life if A'Xiu is willing to be wife. Don't know if get to see her again? Don't know If she is willing to be my wife?"

Ding Dang grabbed his neck with her one hand and pulled in to kiss him on his lips. She puts out a hand on his head to pat his and said immediately: "I have only one wife, why are you unhappy about that? Also why are you sighing?"

Shi Potian knew that she had seen through him and got embarrassed, his face reddened all over, grasped her, did not know what is good, his mind was resisting but on the other hand couldn't give up the this gentle taste, thought for a moment then hugged her but actually didn't dare to kiss.

Ding dang was used to handle worldly affairs boldly but she too was a young girl and panicked, and couldn't kiss Shi Potian. She was quite ashamed, and shrank her body to hide into the corner of bed.

Shi Potian hesitated for half of the day, called in a low voice said: "Ding Dang!"

Ding Dang didn't pay any attention to him and said nothing. In his heart Shi Potian was only thinking of A'Xiu, suddenly he remember how A'Xiu was looking at him with that meaningful glance in the woods of Azure Mist Island, that day, he remembered how she was calling him "elder brother", and in his heart he felt a wild joy as he realized that she was willing to be his wife."

He immediately thought to go and look for her, he sighed and sat on the chair, bent over his desk and did nothing.

Ding Dang saw him not coming towards him felt relived and somewhat disappointed at the same time, thought: "Finally, I found him!"

Day after day were passing and I was not able to found him, I was getting concerned, but now in my heart as though I am feeling such infinite relief.

They sat that way till the dawn, Shi Potian on the chair and Ding Dang on the bed. They heard a gentle knock on a door, Min Rou called out from the other side of the door: "Yu'er, have you gotten up?"

Shi Potian immediately replied without thinking: "mother!"

He stood up and then looked at Ding Dang. He cannot help but felt embarrassed.

Min Rou said: "Open the door; I have few words to say!"

Shi Potian hesitated slightly and then said: "yes!"

Then he went to open the door.

Ding dang too was very shy; she thought that she and Shi Potian were in the same room for entire night, although they had done nothing but still if other people saw it than they will obviously think otherwise.

What more is that the person coming in is her mother-in-law. She thought that he should simply jump out of the bed, shoves open the window, and jump to escape, but then she saw Shi Potian and remembered how difficult it was to find him and now after meeting him how can she leave without even saying good-bye, she even did not know when will they meet again. She gestured him to not open the door.

Shi Potian said in a low voice: "It is my mother, it doesn't matter."

His both hands bumped into the door bolt. Ding dang was greatly anxious, she thought: "For anyone else it doesn't matter but it's your mother so it is most important to me."

She again thought of leaping through the window and run away.

She originally was not afraid of anyone but when it came to meeting her mother-in-law and that too in such awkward situation she cannot help but felt as though her whole body is giving off heat, she saw that Shi Potian had just pulled out the bolt to open the door. She was desperate, her left hand puts forth a move "the tiger fingernail" to attack his Lingtai acu-point, the right hand made a move "beautiful woman picks up the needle" to attack his Xuanshu acu-point.

Shi Potian only felt both acu-points in his body, slightly numb and aching and fainted, Ding Dang held his body and hid in the bottom of bed.

Min Rou was a veteran in martial-art world, she heard a light sound 'Yi' when Ding Dang struck Shi Potian and immediately knew something was wrong. She cherished her son's life very much and didn't wait and struck the door with her shoulder, the door bolt gave away in a single hit, she stepped inside and saw the open window, and her son was not in the room. She called out immediately: "Elder brother come quickly!"

Shi Qing rushed in quickly.

Min Rou said: "Yu'ersomeone has kidnapped him!"

As she was saying she moved for the window. Both people did say anything and simultaneously jumped out of the window. Both coming out of the window, one black one white, just likes two big birds swaying gracefully in the air, looked extremely elegant and wonderful.

Ding Dang saw them from the bottom of the bed and cannot help but to say: "Thank God".

The Shi Qing couple were senior martial-art experts in the realm of rivers and lakes, originally it was not easy to get swindled so easily, but it all happen suddenly, as soon as Min Rou saw her beloved son not in the room and she had just heard from her, she lost her mind, she believed the first bad thoughts which

came to her mind, she expected that someone with Snow mountain sect or from Clan of eternal happiness might be behind it. She burst opened the door the moment she heard that 'Yi' sound, it all happened in a very short period of time. As she came out she calculated that whoever was there he couldn't take Yu'er out and room and disappear in air, definitely they are still in the room.

Shi Potian initially got startled when Ding dang locked his acu-point but his internal energy was extremely vigorous, he managed to open his acu-points immediately, but his body was being held by Ding Dang and actually didn't wanted to make noise and alert his parents so he hesitated. Suddenly the Shi couple came back to the room jumping back from the window.

Under the bed some dust particle entered his nose, Shi Potian sneezed three times as he was being held by Ding dang he looked towards her, saw only her face still red looking extremely charming.

Shi Potian said: "these are my father and mother."

Ding Dang said: "I already know! Yesterday I heard you calling them in the afternoon."

Shi Potian said: "wait for my father and mother to come back, I will introduce you with the?"

Ding dang moved to one side and said: "I do not want it. Your parents despise my grandfather; also they will naturally despise me."

Shi Potian was living with his parents for some time now, he listened to both these people style of speaking, and thought that both are extremely chivalrous, frank and upright people, however with Ding Busan it was different matter, he hesitated a bit and said: "how do you know that?"

Before the Shi couple could reply or say anything Ding dang said hurriedly to Shi Potian: "you come to my room, I have something to say."

Shi Potian asked: "you also are staying in this inn?"

Ding Dang said with a smile: "will I want to grab my husband in midnight; obviously I have a place to sleep?"

As soon as she said these words she went through the window, passes through

the courtyard, saw no one so pushed the gate to enter a small room.

Shi Potian followed her, did not see Ding Busan and felt relieved, he asked: "your grandfather?"

Ding Dang said: "I ran away, my grandfather is not with me."

Shi Potian asked: "why?"

Ding Dang humphed and said: "I wanted to look for you; he didn't agreed so I sneaked off."

Shi Potian moved towards her and said: "Ding Dang, you were looking for me, it's really good."

Ding Dang said with smile: "I am really embarrassed about last night, are you fine with this situation?"

Shi Potian said with a smile: "you said that we are the husband and wife, what is there to get embarrassed."

The complexion of her face changed and her face turned red.

They only heard some voices of people talking in the courtyard, Shi Qing said: "this is the money for room and food!"

The heard the sound of horse's hoof, the couple took the horse and left the place.

Shi Potian moved towards them for two steps, and then stood there for a moment, turned his head and asked Ding dang: "you know where the government office in Songjiang is?"

Ding dang relied with a smile: "It's a big place, everyone knows about it?"

Shi Potian said: "father mother are going to the Songjiang District government office, they are looking for a person named silver halberd Yang Guang. I should go after them."

He had met with Ding dang after some time so he didn't want to leave her so early and bid good-bye.

As soon as Ding Dang understood his intention, she said: "this idiot does not know the road, the Songjiang District government office is in the southeast

direction, I will make him to walk toward Northeast, farther he is from his parents, and more are the chances that we will not meet."

Under her heart she felt assured and cannot help but smiled, her face blossomed like a flower. Shi Potian looked steadily at her for some time.

Ding dang said with a smile: "what are you looking at? Haven't you seen me before?"

Shi Potian said: "Ding dang, youYou are really attractive, you look really good compared to my mother."

He also thought: "If I compare she and A'Xiu, who is more beautiful?"

Ding Dang laughed and said: "elder brother, you are also very attractive, you too look good compared to my grandfather." She laughed aloud as she said.

As soon as two people were done with this idle talk, Shi Potian again got worried about his parents and said: "my parents didn't ask me before leaving, I am worried about them, and I should go after them."

Ding dang said: "good, you are really their filial son."

She too paid the money for room and food and left the shop to go immediately.

In the inn the storekeeper and the servants saw Shi Potian coming with the Shi couple and staying in the inn but now coming out of the room with this unmarried beautiful looking girl. They all expressed admiration for this young person and they were the talk of the town for the next ten days, what is their relation, is it a romantic relationship or they did they already knew each other, everyone discussed it diversely and each had their opinions on this matter.

Shi Potian and Ding dang came out of that town and travelled to the East, walked around three miles, then arrived at a three-road junction. Ding dang took the road to the northeast direction.

Shi Potian expected that she knew the path and so walked side-by-side with her, he said: "my father and mother are riding very fast horses, if they are not eating while traveling and wait for me then we can't overtake them."

She purses her lips and said with a smile: "I expect that your parents are

familiar to the Yang family of the Songjiang District, but I fear that even though your parents are such reputed people they might not recognize the road to that place?"

Shi Potian said: "my father and mother travel all over the world, how will they not recognize this road?"

Both people kept talking all the way. Shi Potian was living with his parents for some time now, they were teaching him and he had a better understanding of the worldly affairs now. When Ding Dang saw his talking in such a manner, she chuckled in her heart and thought: "After he got sick, he had forgotten many things of the past, but he only needed more time to recover. Once he remembers the martial-art world's customs he won't forget it again.

Both people arrived at a small town while traveling and stopped there to eat. They found a small hotel and entered lobby; saw nearly all the three tables were already occupied by other people. Two people were sitting in the corner on a very small table. That hotel originally was not really big, the servant were busy taking care of the meal for the people on three large table, and had no free time to pay attention to these two people.

She saw at least eighteen-nineteen people sitting on the large table, three of them were females; they were aged, looked ordinary but had pointed weapons clipped to their belts. They were talking in loud voices, drinking wine from large bowl and eating meat but were looking heroic from their appearance. She thought obviously these people are from martial-art world, not those petty government officials but chivalrous outlaws."

She looked around but no one paid any attention towards them, she thought: "I and elder brother are travelling alone for the first time, we will share a table and eat food, such a opportunity comes once in a lifetime." She felt really happy in her heart.

The servant did not come to attend them so she felt angry and was about to yell when she heard someone else shouting suddenly from behind: "Bring some liquor and meat, grandfather is really very hungry."

As soon as Shi Potian listened to this sound, he found it familiar and turned around to see the old man shouting, he was actually Ding Busi. Shi Potian was

startled and shouted hurriedly: "It is not good!"

Has turned his head and didn't dare to look in his direction.

Ding Dang said in a low voice: "he is my grand-uncle, do not look at him, I will dress up and then return." She didn't wait for Shi Potian to reply and then slid quickly in to the back room.

Although Ding Busi saw that the all the tables were already occupied, actually there was place vacant nearby the table where Shi Potian was standing. On that table there was no tableware, did not have the cooked food, but that place was situated immediately in the middle of that bench, however as soon as Ding Busi pushed his left shoulder, one person got pushed aside.

That person got very angry and made an effort to push him, he thought in his heart that if he pushed this old man than he will fall on the other side. However he felt a strong counter force himself as he applied more pressure as if some fierce internal force was forcing him in other direction, he was unable to hold on and he slanted as though he will fell but Ding Busi caught his hand and pulled him, he said: "One should not be impolite, we can sit together!"

That person tried to pull away from him but also couldn't, a big purple bulge appeared on his face, he understood Ding Busi is too good for him.

Ding Busi said: "Please accept my invitation! Please don't be impolite."

He took the wine bowl and drank from it directly. Others were using the chopsticks; he pinched a large amount of beef and ate it with gusto.

The people on the other three tables didn't know him but they now knew that his martial-art is not weak. They thought as soon as he pushed that person fell but when pulled him that person couldn't break free, this person is old but his background is not ordinary. Ding Busi drank more wine from the bowl and ate more meat; he shook his head and looked extremely happy. People on all the three tables, all the eighteen-nineteen people stopped eating and looked at him helplessly.

Ding Busi said: "you are not drinking?"

He snatched the liquor bowl from thin old man sitting in front of him and drank a large part of bowl, wiped his beard and said: "this wine has some acids; it is not

good for you."

That thin old man suppressed his anger and asked: "You're Excellency, what is your honored name?"

Ding Busi said with a smile: "you did not know my name; actually you're not good enough to know my name."

That old man said: "we were earning out living in Guandong and have very little knowledge about the heroes inside the Great Wall. I'm called Liaodong crane Fan Yi."

Ding Busi said with a smile: "You are such a dark and swarthy, no way someone can call you a white crane more likely a crow, why don't you rename to Liaodong crow Fan Yi, actually that will be wonderful."

As soon as Fan Yi heard it he got angry, pounds the table and shouted loudly: "we are strangers still I am showing you respect because of your white beard, I do not came here to argue with you. Back off or I will kill you just for amusement, grandpa!"

A middle-aged man from another table suddenly said: "is it possible that this old is helping clan of eternal happiness?"

Shi Potian heard "clan of eternal happiness" these three characters, in his heart he felt cold. He then saw Ding dang coming wearing a felt hat to cover her head, also wearing a simple gray cotton cloth, dressed up like a hotel servant. She came to the nearby table. Shi Potian found it pretty strange, he didn't have any idea how she managed to get hold of these cloths.

She smiled faintly and said in a soft voice near his ear: "I selected it but actually the servant has borrowed these garments to me so fourth grandpa doesn't recognize me.

Elder brother, let me wipe this on your face."

As she said these words she smudged ash on his face with both her hands, his cheeks blackened immediately. Shi Potian was unable to withstand the filth and started to wipe his own face. Although there were several people in hotel but no one was actually looking at them. Everybody was looking at Ding Busi, who had time to pay attention to these two people playing tricks.

Ding Busi looked at that tall person by swiveling his eyes but not turning his face, sneered slightly and said: "you are from the black dragon sect from Jinzhou, isn't it? Young fellow, you come to the central plains, carrying this nine-soft whip and looking down arrogantly at all of us, are you tired of living?"

This man was Feng Liang; the head of black dragon sect of Jingzhou, nine-soft whip was his sect's inherited martial-art. When he heard Ding Busi actually knowing about his origin, he felt happy, he thought: "this nine-soft whip I am carrying is my sect's heritage; unexpectedly my black dragon sect's reputation is so good that even people in central plain too know about it."

He said immediately: "Yes, I am from the black dragon sect of Jingzhou. Old gentleman what is your name?" he asked politely.

Ding Busi patted the table with earth-shaking sound, and said loudly: "irritates me! Irritates me! Irritates me!"

He said these characters "irritates me" three times, lifted his bowl to drink, but his face was very calm and actually he was grinning and didn't look angry. Other people didn't know what the meaning of these characters is or what they refer to? They only heard him to thinking aloud: "nine soft-whips is as nimble and resourceful weapon as an arrow. It's difficult to learn, difficult to use and most difficult to grasp its essence. To master it is as if to rein a dragon. Any Tom, Dick and Harry is nowadays carrying this nine soft-whips, it really irritates me!"

Feng Liang was initially happy that this old knew about the nine soft-whips and looked at him like an intimate friend but when he listened to him saying "irritates me", he thought: "I don't have clue why this old gentleman is angry?"

Ding Busi didn't pay any attention towards him, raised his eyes and looked all around at room, and thought aloud: "when your grandpa sees other people waving and thrusting swords and saber, I am not angry but when I see idiots raising nine soft-whips, just can't control this rage. His grannies, those Peng brothers from Hunan were using nine soft-whips, last year your grandfather butchered both of them. That military officer from Sichuan surnamed Zhang too was using nine soft-whips, your grandpa hit his brain to pulp. A lady from Fengyang in Anhui province too used nine soft-whips; grandfather did not like killing woman, so I only cut her both hands and asked her henceforth not to

bump in to me in future."

The more people listened the more they got startled, although it looked that this old man was farting, speaking wild and nonsense but actually they have heard that what he was saying is not a lie. The Peng brothers from Hunan, Shi Dipeng from Zhenjiang, Peng Suohu all used nine soft-whips and all of them got killed last year, they even heard it in Guandong.

Feng Liang's facial color went pale, he moved his hand to nine soft-whip's handle and said: "how is it that you're Excellency hate people using nine soft-whips so much as to kill them?"

Ding Busi laughed aloud and said: "you're talking nonsense! How can Grandpa hate people using nine soft-whips?" He moved his hand to his bosom and with a crashing sound he took out his nine soft-whips. This soft whip was glittering and divided nine parts; obviously a lot of gold was used to make it. Although the whip was the main weapon but there were several types of assorted gems on the handle and it looked sparkling, bright and truly magnificent, exhibiting both overwhelming power and attractiveness.

All of sudden numerous people hearts went cold and some said: "Oh...he too carries nine soft-whips."

Ding Busi said: "Boy, you have not even learnt a two third of your martial-arts and you are roaming the martial-art world carrying the nine soft-whips, taking the seat of honor with others, if some challenges you would be crawling on your four limbs or will evade him and crawl back to your home, how can you belittle these nine soft-whips? Grandpa has already heard that black dragon sect from Jinzhou uses the nine soft-whips and people have inherited it from about seven-eight generations. I already wanted to come and kill your entire family cleanly but Ah...it is only that Jinzhou is extremely cold and grandpa was disinclined to catch up people so afar and kill them, but you boy, came yourself to the central plains carrying the nine soft-whips, its good. It's really good!

It would have been better if you had hanged yourself, come what are you waiting for now?"

When Feng Liang heard it he understood that originally this old person also uses the nine soft-whips and don't want others to use the same weapon. He

thought that this person is really harsh and unreasonable. He was going to reply then he heard someone saying these words in a resounding voice: "humph! Thanks god! This old fellow doesn't use a sword, such a fortune."

Ding Busi looked at the person who said these words, he saw a person from the west region, on his cheek a fine beard saying all these words with a straight face. He then asked: "I don't use the sword so what?"

That person with the beard said: "if grandpa was also using a sword then by your rule you would have killed me too. In this martial-art world thousands of people use the sword so you have to kill all these people, now that would be really tiresome, isn't it? That is why I said we are fortunate." As he said he moved his hands and drew out his sword from his waist and inserted it on the table.

This sword was purple gold in color with a thin black edge, on the hilt was hanging a purple silk. As soon as he inserted the sword in the table, the entire table vibrated and all the dishes and bowls hit each other and made noises. Everyone understood that this sword is really heavy and the person had enormous strength.

This man was Lu Zhengping, the chief of the sharp sword sect from Changbai Mountain's in Zilin.

All of them heard a notch sound; Ding Busi quickly put back his nine soft-whips in his bosom, curved his left hand and pulled out the sword from the waist from the man standing close to him. He said: "grandpa now carries a sword in his hand so what? Oh, is not right! Irritates me! Irritates me! Irritates me!"

The type of sword was the most common weapon in the martial-art world. Here in about nineteen people at least eleven were holding swords in their waists. When they saw how skillfully and with extreme quickness he has snatched the sword from that person they couldn't help but shivered and shocked at the same time and immediately everyone's hand reached to the hilt of their sword.

He again said: "Grandpa has also nickname called 'not more than four a day', even if I have to kill still there are eleven young fellows with sword in their hand. It will take your grandpa three days to kill all of you..." People heard him self-proclaiming himself as called 'not more than four a day' and suddenly

understood who this old man is.

Several people blurted out: "He... He is Ding Busi."

He laughed out aloud and said: "Grandpa today won't kill more than four people...you know what they call me...Ding Busi". He called his name aloud again then said: "As per my nick name I will kill only four people, maybe this young fellow too who is roaming around with this nine soft whips in his waist. However I may forgive you all if you kowtow in front of me and say me grandpa, then I might not kill you." However he heard heng heng sound of people sneering at him. Four people suddenly stood up and moved out of the shop and lined up outside, in addition to Feng Liang, Fan Yifei and Lu Zhengping these three people, the fourth one was a middle-aged woman.

This woman didn't hold her weapons in her hand but had them tied to her waist with a doubled up sash. She had two rows of shining knife, each knife about half length to normal knife, at least there were three dozen more knife were neatly tucked in an embroidered flower around her waist.

Fan Yifei held a pair of judge pens in his hands.

He said: "We all, brother Feng Liang, the head of black dragon sect of Jingzhou , myself Fan Yifei, younger brother Lu Zhengping from the sharp sword sect from Changbai sect and the lady from the Wan ma manor, flying locust Gao San Niangzi have come to the central plains to meet and work on for a common purpose. We and you grandpa Ding Busi has no past feuds or enmity; still you have humiliated us again and again, one can tolerate but to what end? "

Ding Busi heard these words but pretended as though he has not heard a single word. He turned his head and looked at Gao San Niangzi for a long while and said: "Not beautiful, not that good looking!"

He said these words and then looked at the embroidered flower and shook his head repeatedly, as if he was appreciating the calligraphy and painting but wasn't too impressed with it; by his expression of course everyone understood that he wanted to say that this lady Gao San Niangzi is in poor appearance.

That Lady Gao San Niangzi, was very arrogant in nature, one she herself was extremely skilled, secondly her father and father-in-law, both were highly reputed and respected masters of martial arts in the Guandong province. Thirdly

her family owned millions of acres of fertile farmland, race course grounds and forests. Even though she was a widow, she was well-known in Guandong, regardless of who the person is whether the government officials or the common people or the underworld gangsters, everyone yielded to her.

Ding Busi spoke to her in his unbridled no nonsense way, in her life she has never felt so humiliated, not to mention that she was in the middle of all the martial art fraternity of Guandong. As per Guandong social customs women are very earnest, they are not even praised in front of other let alone to ridicule them in public. Her face turned white in anger and she called:" Ding Busi, why don't you come out!"

Ding Busi slowly came out of the shop and said: "So it's you four?"

Suddenly he saw as though five white streaks of light are flying towards him. The short knives she had on her sash she was using as projectiles and were coming from all directions and attacking his upper and lower body both. The knives were short in size but the sound they created by slashing in air indicated that the power emanated from them was no different.

Ding Busi shouted in their direction and said: "People are not beautiful but knives are!" He moved his right hand into his bosom to draw his nine soft whips, sunlight glittering from his soft whips and immediately he shot down the four knives. He showed off his skills and didn't hit the fifth knives and everyone saw it missing him and thudded in the gate of the shop.

Feng Liang, Fan Yifei and Lu Zhengping all got startled but stared at him blankly and immediately moved their weapons in offensive stance and moved at him surrounding.

Ding Busi slanted his body to get away from Lu Zhengping and chopped towards Fan Yifei. He jumped towards him and attacked at his wrist. Fan Yifei has no other option to avoid this attack so he withdrew his judge pens and moved back.

The nine soft whips suddenly changed their direction and moved towards Feng Liang. Feng Liang took a big leap over the gate of the shop and moved beyond his reach. He knew that this old grandpa is highly skilled and he will run after him so right away Feng Liang vibrated his wrist in such a way that the nine soft whips

launched in a spear-like motion. This move "exterminate the guest in one move" was an extremely refined and powerful martial-art move and needed strong strength to force these soft whips in spearing motion. This was a unique skill of his Black Dragon sect and he thought to catch Ding Busi unaware.

Ding Busi spat downwards and said appraisingly: "this young fellow has few tricks."

He stretched out his right hand to meet the nine soft whips head on and actually managed to grasp the first whip. Feng Liang was startled and he immediately moved his arm to retract the nine soft whips but Ding Busi was not going to leave the whips. Fortunately Lu Zhengping brandished his sword towards the crook of his elbow. Ding Busi thought to deal with it with his palm but suddenly he heard the swishing sound of three projectiles moving towards him shot by Gao San Niangzi and had to withdraw.

All four people now started to attack Ding Busi in cohesion. Ding Busi made a smiling face but concentrated inwardly to tackle the combined attack of all these people, his nine soft whips danced around him fluently and he concentrated hard to protect his whole body. In his heart he thought secretly: "I didn't expect that the martial arts of Guangdong so explicit, it looks that I have underestimated them actually. If these four fellows come up one by one, I can kill them effortlessly, well once they fight together as a unit they have been quite difficult to handle. "

All these four sects from Guangdong have assembled earlier in the first month to test each other skills and also to learn ways to fight together against any common enemy before coming to the central plains. That exercise had really paid its dividends now as those drills performed beforehand were really time wasted. All those four people stood shoulder to shoulder against their common foe.

At this moment Lu Zhengping and Fan Yifei were standing very close to each other and attacking Ding Busi from one side and Feng Liang was standing on the other side flawlessly executing the moves from his nine soft whips. Ding Busi stood in the centre and fighting ferociously to fend off their attacks. Gao San Niangzi stood at a distant place and used her short blades to attack and divert Ding Busi's attention whenever he gains advantage over any other person.

Of these four people Fan Yifei was most shrewd and ruthless. Lu Zhengping has profound arm strength. Each of his sword strike has the strength of eighty-ninety catties.

Shi Potian and the Dingdang stood among the crowd and observed the fight. After around 30-40 moves, they saw Lu Zhengping and Fan Yifei attacking Ding Busi simultaneously. Ding Busi was parrying the blows with his nine soft whips and in the meantime was keeping Feng Liang at bay. Feng Liang swept his whip towards him and Ding Busi just managed to avoid the blow and scoffed at him. Suddenly two more projectiles passed over gently and swiftly, very close to his pharynx and larynx. Although Ding Busi managed to evade this move but one of the short swords truncated his silver beard. About a dozen of silver threads danced around his face.

The other disciples and people from the Guangdong who were observing this fight from the shop cheered in one voice and said: "Gao San Niangzi is really good with her short knives!"

Ding Busi was secretly startled in his heart and thought: "this young lady is quite a killer. If I come out of this fight unscathed then I owe myself a big meal!"

He cried aloud and suddenly spread out the nine soft whips, behind this façade of soft whips he employed the seize technique from his left hand, the soft whips hits far, the left hand attacks close to his body, he tried to use employ his left hand but Lu Zhengping and Fan Yifei advanced towards him and closed him down and didn't gave him opportunity to strike.

The Guangdong people standing in the crowd cheered in one voice but as soon as their voices faded, there was obvious concern on their faces.

Shi Potian actually looked at this move with delight. Ding Busi taught him these moves once on the long river boat however at that time his knowledge of martial-arts was very limited and he was simply remembering it without understanding it and did not know how to utilize. Recently after learning and practicing martial-arts with his parents, he started to understand the smaller subtleties of the various techniques.

He saw that Ding Busi kept on parrying their attacks but didn't hurry to use his seizing technique and was waiting for perfect opportunity to catch him

unawares. They cancelled a dozen ingenious ruthless attacks between themselves and in fact the others look pleasantly surprised.

He saw the five people fighting at a luxurious pace, suddenly Ding Busi swerved his left arms suddenly, the palm moved towards the shoulder of Lu Zhengping. Lu Zhengping brandished his sword cut his arm. Shi Potian was shocked as he knew Lu Zhengping will be executing the same move and he also knew that Ding Busi to is expecting it but he will use his opportunity to turn over his palm and hit at his face and with his ruthless palm strength, it was pretty difficult to say if Lu Zhengping will be able to survive or not.

Shi Potian was not able to restrain and suddenly shouted: "Watch out, he will hit your face!"

His internal energy was abundant, as soon as he called despite the cacophony of all sorts of weapons, various person can still hear him clearly. Lu Zhengping was adept in martial arts and the moment he heard this shout he too immediately realized the danger and hurriedly let go his sword and lied down and rolled, this all happened in a flash.

Ding Busi exerted tremendous force with this palm attack and didn't manage to stop his attack and since he didn't managed to connect Lu Zhengping he himself got carried away.

He was breathing heavily and his own face ached as if he got hit by a sword, after he tumbles out several feet, then only he managed to jump and got steady on his feet. His heart jumping madly and he knew it was really a close call, as if someone has to remind him this was really a matter of life or death.

As soon as Lu Zhengping tumbled out of the fight; he knew that Fan Yifei will be in danger immediately. Lu Zhengping called out: "throw me a sword!" His senior disciple threw a sword towards him immediately, Lu Zhengping stretched out and caught it and in the same motion got ready to attack. However he saw the soft whips of Ding Busi and Feng Liang entwined and unexpectedly he saw the body of Feng Liang coming towards him with great speed towards his own out stretched sword. Lu Zhengping let down his sword anxiously.

Shi Potian called out: "Master Fan be careful, grasps your pharynx and larynx!" As soon as Fan Yifei heard it he didn't have much time to ponder over it but still

he used his pair of judge pen to protect his pharynx and larynx. Ding Busi attacked him at the same moment but was not able to catch him and only managed to scratch him and passed over gently and swiftly nearby his pharynx and larynx making five bloodstains.

Shi Potian had called twice and saved life of two people from their group. The Guandong group felt grateful towards him and everyone turned his head to look towards him but all they saw was a young fellow with his face blackened by dust and coal obviously he was not willing to show his true identity.

Ding Busi shouted abuse towards him: "your paternal grandmother, that dog hybrid is really gossipy? Come out and fight grandpa if you really want to!"

Shi Potian extends his tongue to Dingdang and said: "heHe recognized me!"

Dingdang said: "You are really gossipy however I don't thing that dog hybrid part was for you."

By now Lu Zhengping and Fan Yifei had recovered and were again attacking Ding busi from both sides, Gao San Niangzi too launched her short knives at Ding Busi in between to help them. In the meanwhile Feng Liang too had extricated his whips from the entanglement, so now all five people were again in the middle of ferocious fight; however Ding Busi was extremely eager to speak with that person who has twice foiled his attacks by shouting warnings. Shi Potian didn't want these people from the Guandong to lose their life in such a pointless battle. Whenever any one of these people are in danger he shouted to give them warning and thus in a very short time he rescued Lu Zhengping three times, Fan Yifei four times and Feng Liang three times.

Ding Busi was burning with rage and anger, he suddenly jumped in the air and leapt towards Gao San Niangzi and attacked with his left palm. This move "powerful and unconstrained style" was really unique and the hand movements were really strange.

Shi Potian called out immediately however Gao San Niangzi only managed to slant at one side still her right shoulder got hit by the fingers of Ding Busi. She felt a heavy jolt and her right hand felt really weary. She took out her knives from her left hand and threw at Ding Busi. Ding Busi scoffed at her in a condescending

manner and moved his nine soft whips, and in a single swipe entwined the short knives in his soft whips and immediately shot the two knives at Lu Zhengping and Feng Liang simultaneously.

He also attacked Gao san Niangzi in the same motion with his nine soft whips. She was already injured so she leapt high in the air to avoid his attack, as soon as she leapt she heard people calling out at her in alarm. Actually when she was in mid-air then only she saw two of her short knives moving towards her with great speed.

Fan Yifei and other too saw this but they were themselves in danger and didn't have any opportunity to save Gao San Niangzi. They felt really bad as she was saving them from Ding Busi's continuous attacks by throwing knives but at this time they were too far from her to save her.

Ding Busi was really mad with anger but he changed his strategy at the right time to attack Gao San Niangzi. He threw the short knives lying nearby with great speed. Gao san Niangzi was already in air and she had little time to change her direction or avoid these knives. As the knives came closer a thought passed over mind: "So I at last die with my own short knife by this despicable old bandit, such is the irony of life, a respected lady throughout my life and dying in such a way in front of these many people."

Feng Liang used his soft whips to deflect the short knives moving towards him and Lu Zhengping but was still far away from Gao San Niangzi.

Shi Potian saw with his own eyes the moment Ding Busi threw the knife and he also yelled but he knew it won't make any difference. He knew that the situation is very critical. Immediately his right hand moved swiftly and he plucked out short knives from the shop's gate and flung.

He has never practiced the art of throwing projectiles or hidden weapons, so he quickly shot seven-eight knives towards her with incredible agility. As his internal energy was really strong one of the knives hit the knife moving towards the abdomen of Gao San Niangzi and cut it in to two. The other flew close to her neck and cut her hair.

Gao San Niangzi landed vertically from several tens of feet on high spot but she still managed to stand on her feet but she was frightened to her core and all the

color of her face drained out.

This time Ding Busi made a bug strange face. He turned around immediately and shouted in Shi Potian's direction: "Is it my friend who has interfered in this fight gain? If you have guts then come out and fight three hundred round and I won't blame you."

He was staring at Shi Potian, because on his face Shi Potian has rubbed a lot of coal & dirt so he didn't recognize him. He listened to Shi Potian calling regularly throughout the fight to help his opponents and breaking his attack as if he was anticipating his each and every move. Even now he saw the short knife this young fellow has throw toward his knife; it simply cut his knife in to two and still moved on like a flash so obviously his internal energy is extremely strong. However at this instance he was really angry and he knew that this young person is really formidable still he couldn't restrain himself from challenging him.

When Shi Potian was rescuing these people he didn't care if this act of his is good or bad. As soon as he saw Gao san Niangzi in danger, he was anxious and hurriedly threw the short knives to intercept those pair of knives but unexpectedly when he managed to save her he was pleasantly surprised. One of the knife actually cut his palm and blood start dripping from it and suddenly he felt pain in his hand. For a moment he didn't acknowledge any thing and blustered out in Ding Busi's direction: "fourth grandpa, I.....I am.....big steamed rice dumpling!"

Ding Busi made a zheng sound and laughed immediately and said with a smile: "ha! So it is you big steamed rice dumpling!" He thought in his mind: "this boy has studied my martial arts, no wonder he can easily anticipate my next moves, obviously at least this bit is not strange."

As soon as this thought came to his mind he again got angry and shouted in his direction: "this thief boy is coming in the way of grandpa every now and then and interfering in other people's business!" He shouted at him and the same moment strikes with his whip towards him.

Shi Potian felt the vigorous rush of air as the nine soft whips moved towards him, he moved backwards to avoid being hit, although he moved quite quickly but this was very clumsy and looked ugly.

Ding Busi raged with more anger and attacked ferociously with a series of three moves, this strategic move was utmost ingenious, Shi Potian dodged them by moving sideways. The internal energy of Shi Potian has already reached the level where he was able to move his body the way he wanted. These moves of Ding Busi were acquired over a long period of time and were very deadly, although Shi Potian didn't attack him but the ease with which he avoided his attack really shocked Ding Busi.

He thought in his heart: "I haven't taught this whip moves to him still he managed to avoid it easily. How is it so?"

When a nine soft whip moves it glitters too in the sunlight and it held a trance over Shi Potian until it kept moving and he stood in his place waiting for next move. Suddenly Ding Busi remembered how he and Ding Busan both fought with this big steamed rice dumpling and Bai Wanjian on the Azure mist island unexpectedly they had to run away after getting beaten.....No, the third brother actually accepted his ignominious defeat, I however didn't want to hurt people from younger generation that's why I simply moved away. This young fellow was always frightened of me so he didn't dare to pursue, but anyway this boy was always a little strange"

Other people standing there saw Shi Potian evading the soft whip at him with just side stepping and were truly amazed as this extremely risky ploy and several people just couldn't believe he was successfully evading his attacks and cold sweat trickled down their neck.

On the other hand Shi Potian actually thought in his heart: "Grandpa Ding Busi is really playing with me. He is simply joking with me that's why he is intentionally passing his whips gently and swiftly to my side."

He didn't know that Ding Busi was actually trying his best but is simply not able to hit him.

Dingdang knew his grand uncle is very fierce in nature and he won't hold back for anyone, she knew that the way he is attacking Shi Potian, if he manages to connect even a single blow, it will break his bones so she called out immediately: "elder brother Shi, hit back quickly! If you won't hit back, it will be really bad!"

The people heard these words coming out from a servant's mouth but the voice

was actually of a female and were amazed but this was nothing compared to the way Shi Potian was evading the attacks without getting hurt in that chaotic whirlwind of the soft whips .

Shi Potian thought: "why can this be bad? On that day when I tied up my left arm when fighting with those Taoist priests, they became really angry and thought that I was looking down at them. My mother said that if one starts the fight than most people will despise him however if someone wins and then shows contempt by spoken words or by actions then it is a matter of great shame and henceforth will result in deadly enmity. So If I only fend off the attacks but do not hit back then fourth grandpa will be really angry." He immediately extended both his hands together to grasp the chest of Ding Busi; he used the move eighteen seizing techniques taught to him by Dingdang.

This martial art was originated from the Ding family so how Ding Busi could not know it? He avoided this move immediately but the execution of these seizing techniques used by Shi Potian was accompanied by vigorous internal energy. To hook, to belt, to lock, to take, to poke, to strike, to divide, to poke, to bend... each move was coming with overwhelming power.

Ding Busi was startled, he called out: "you do have tricks boy. You do have!"

When he started the twelfth move, Shi Potian used the fifth variation of the phoenix tail move to grasp the nine soft whips. Ding Busi had enormous strength but unexpectedly he was not able to free the nine soft whips. He gave a loud shout and concentrated the focus of his entire internal strength to get back the nine soft whips. He was very proud person and in front of all these many people he couldn't allow this young fellow to seize his nine soft whips. The entire joints in his body started to make noises as he displayed the pinnacle of his skills.

Shi Potian thought: "It looks as if grandpa wants me to leave his soft whips."

The moment his fingers loosened, he only heard loud sound of something being struck and then falling to the ground with several loud voices. Actually the moment Ding Busi applied his entire strength to seize back his whips, at the same moment Shi Potian left the whips willingly. Ding Busi was forced backwards and took with himself several people in the crowd and hit the hotel's wall. The wall collapsed because of the impact and a lot of brick and mud scattered in the

shop. Along with people several tables and stools, the dishes, bowls and countless household utensils were crushed.

Shi Potian heard the screams and crying of several people from the shop. At least four Guandong juniors and three idlers were on the floor and blood was gushing out of vest of one person.

When Shi Potian moved towards the collapsed wall he only found the four people coming out of it and several broken bowls, or the bamboo chopsticks but Ding Busi disappeared without a trace. One he knew that Ding Busi has left, he felt a lot better. He turned around to see the injured person and the carnage Ding Busi has left behind in the shop.

In a moment fan Yifei came in and started helping the injured people. He saw that all the people had injuries in their strategic acu-points. He was amazed that despite the fact that Ding Busi was flying backwards still he managed to hit these people with such accuracy.

He also thought that if Shi Potian has not intervened at several critical junctures and fought with him then surely all of fours sect leader would have been dead by this time.

He immediately knelt down before Shi Potian and said: "Young hero, your benevolence is unforgettable, can I ask your esteemed name."

Shi Potian has already learnt about the etiquettes of the martial-art realm from his mother so he too knelt down in front of Fan Yifei and immediately returned the salutation and said: "I don't dare, I don't dare! This is just a small matter, it's not worth mentioning? My surname is Shi and I am given the name Zhong Yu."

Fan Yifei too told him his name and about their sect and also about rest of them. He then noticed Dingdang and asked him about her.

Shi Potian said: "she is called Dingdang, she is mymymy..." he said "my" three times and then blushed and didn't said anything further. Fan Yifei thought that both these young man and woman are traveling together in the martial-art realm and feel embarrassed about it so its better to leave the awkward matters aside and didn't talked about that matter.

Dingdang said: "come on, let go!"

Shi Potian said: "yes, yes!"

He cupped his one hand in the other across his chest to make farewell speech with these people.

Fan Yifei felt extreme gratitude towards Shi Potian. He came out of the small town to see them off. Various people wanted to meet Shi Potian and wanted to ask him about his martial arts and his school but when fan Yifei saw that Dingdang was giving meaningful glances to Shi Potian, he understood that she doesn't want these people to disturb them so directed those people to leave them alone.

He said: "young hero Shi, you have shown great kindness on us people. In this life if you ever face some difficulty or in future if you ever need us, we people of Guandong will to go through water and tread on fire to return your favor but won't refuse under any condition."

Shi Potian recalled what his mother taught him and replied: "everybody is martial arts world is like family and we all have to pursue righteousness and justice. If we cooperate with each other than all the evil can be terminated. Today we became friend, what more favor can you return. I am extremely happy."

As soon as Fan Yifei heard these words he thought that this young hero has saved our lives still he is so polite, although he is so young still his martial-arts skill are amazing and he is so amiable. He really admired him and was not willing to say good-bye after such a short meeting.

Dingdang listened to Shi Potian saying these words and chuckled in her hear and thought: "who says that my Shi Lang is an idiot? His martial arts has surpassed the fourth grandfather, he has also been talking quite sensibly nowadays and is getting sharp with his brain."

She really felt happy in her heart and smiled. Although she had soot and dirt on her on face but the moment she smiled it collapsed. Several people were now paying attention towards her as they saw a bright-colored young girl, who was wearing a broken felt hat on her head, had put on a greasy dirty looking robe worn by Buddhist or Taoist.

Gao San Niangzi put out a hand to pull her arm and said with a smile: "this kind of beautiful appearance for a servant, on her ear she also is wearing a pearl earring. I think the servants in the central plains are a lot different from our Guandong."

The people listened to her and everyone laughed.

Dingdang also smiled and thought: "As soon as I saw fourth grandfather just then, I was really afraid and in hurry changed everything but this pearl earring."

Gao San Niangzi saw hundreds of people from the town were looking at them; they were common people, stood far enough and watched these pugilists but didn't dare to come close. They knew that there was a very fierce fight a little while back in the shop and Ding Busi has already killed three people from the town. The locals were very poor and didn't know if these people are robbers or chivalrous outlaw.

Gao San Niangzi said: "We can't stay here for long, let's move."

She told to Dingdang: "younger sister, I am afraid your current clothes have smeared your good clothes too. I have brought a lot of clothes, if you do not mind then we can move to some family inn and there you can take a bath and change your clothes too. I have seen a lot of painting and drawing from central plains in Guandong and they depict that women here are extremely beautiful woman. I want to look at you after you have changed your dress to a female attire and look like those women from the pictures so in future when I return to Guandong at least I can boast in front of friends and relatives."

Gao San Niangzi said these sweet words in low voice near her ear.

Dingdang pursed her lips to smile and said: "I will not dress up otherwise elder sister will laugh at me."

Gao San Niangzi listened to her saying these words and knew she agreed so she soon wielded her left hand and said: "everybody move!"

The people complied and pulled their horses and then invited Shi Potian and Dingdang to accompany them, and then various people started to move out of the town carrying the corpses of their fellow disciples.

Normally the group is lead by the person who is senior in age or martial arts

skill, considering these Fan Yifei should have been leading them but after coming to central plains from Guandong, Gao San Niangzi was bearing all the expenses and she was bold as well as extravagant and she was spending money like water so everyone treated her as their leader.

The horses from Guandong were healthy and of good quality and within a short time they covered dozens of miles.

Shi Potian asked Dingdang quietly: "Does this path leads towards Songjiang District?"

Dingdang smiled and nodded at him. Actually Songjiang District was in the southeast direction and these people were moving in the northwest direction directly opposite to the Shi couple.

That evening they reached to a large town called Pingyang. They looked for the largest inn in the town and lodged in. they also had the corpses of their colleagues so Lu Zhengping and his disciples went to arrange the cremation of those dead and gather their ashes.

Gao San Niangzi helped Dingdang to her bedroom and asked her to choose a dress for herself. Gao San Niangzi saw that although Dingdang had put on the clothes of a married women but the way she moved, she still looked like a virgin girl. She couldn't help but got more curious about her.

That night the Guandong people gave a big feast to Shi Potian and Dingdang by cutting a pig. As they talked whenever Gao San Niangzi and Fan Yifei tried to ask Shi Potian and Dingdang about their teacher or the origin of their school, Shi Potian got reluctant and uneasy and tried to evade the question. They saw him reluctant so didn't dare to ask again.

Gao san Niangzi took a close look at Shi Potian and Dingdang and saw them looking at each other with fondness and thought: "These two people are not telling about their origin and are awkward if someone asks them about it. It looks they are lovers and have eloped from their home. "

Before coming to Central plains, Fan Yifei was usually considered insufferably arrogant in Guandong, however after that fight with Ding Busi, where they were so comprehensively beaten that he was humbled, on the other hand Lu Zhengping was still inflexible and have still doubts about these two people.

Shi Potian and Dingdang ate and drank along and with others till they were full up to their neck. Once the banquet dispersed, Gao San Niangzi winked towards Fan Yifei and they both nudged Shi Potian and Dingdang to a room.

Gao San Niangzi said with smile: "sire, don't you think out new bride is really beautiful?"

Shi Potian blushed and looked towards Dingdang and saw her blushing too, he wanted to glance at her again but couldn't but felt shy in front of these people but cannot restrain his heart from thumping badly. They both stepped backwards a couple of steps and relied on the wall to stand.

Gao San Niangzi said with a smile: "Tonight should be the wedding festivities for you two but I am afraid there is no clown here? I think we should leave you two alone." As soon as she came near the door, her left hand swung and she threw a short knife towards the shining candle. It cut the candle in two but didn't fade the light and went out of the window. Gao San Niangzi said with a smile: "I respectfully congratulate you two on this happy union and hope it last for a hundred years and you two grow old together!"

She closed the door with a loud sound and moved out.

Once Shi Potian and Dingdang are in the room alone, Dingdang felt as if her whole body is on fire and her heart was pounding. Suddenly Shi Potian remembered about A'Xiu and thought that if she sees me in this condition with Dingdang then she will be surely angry and won't be willing to be my wife. Then how will I manage that situation?"

Suddenly he heard someone shouting in the courtyard: "A true man is a real hero, let's come out and fight if you really want to, why are you throwing knives at people in the dark, such a coward?"

Dingdang rushed to Shi Potian and grasped his both palms in her hand and couldn't restrain herself to chuckle and said to him in low voice: "Gao San Niangzi threw that short knife to extinguish the candle for us but it looks as if that person has misunderstood the situation."

Shi Potian opened his mouth to explain things to that person but a pleasantly warm and tender palm pressed down his mouth.

He only heard that person in the courtyard outside still scolding: "this short knife is really dangerous and sinister. In Guandong, People are not concerned about their face in the martial-art realm so they use it. I even heard that a sl*t named Gao San Niangzi didn't manage to learn any kind of martial arts so she uses this kind of short knives but I didn't believe that such kind of person exist in the central plains too. This is really shameful."

Gao San Niangzi initially thought that this person has misunderstood her intension and he thinks someone is throwing knives at him that is why he is shouting and cursing but when he mentioned her name then she was surprised and thought: "I do not know, who knows about me and my knives and speaking so disrespectfully? "

That person continued his rant with more fervor and energy and shouted: "This town is filled up with the stinking of these foreign horses. These people from Guangdong and those barbarians who own these horses have inundated the central plains. These bandits don't have food to eat so they have come here to steal and rob the local people. If I find these people from Guangdong then I will thrash them. "

This way he insulted the Guangdong people. Listening to this barrage of insults Lu Zhengping and other disciples of his sect came out and saw a person of small height and stature was shouting all these nonsense.

He said to that person: "My friend, you are spouting nonsense, what is your real intention?"

That person said: "What is my intention? Whenever I see people from Guangdong with flat skulls (Lu Zhengping had shaved his head), I get angry and all I want is to cut them down and hang to a beam.

Lu Zhengping said: "This is very good, here is flat skull, come and chop it!"

He appeared as if he has stopped and leaned his body towards right and in a flash took out his purple golden sword and swiped at his head with his full strength. The sword immediately cut that person in to two parts from his waist. The entire courtyard filled with the blood. By now Fan Yifei, Feng Liang and Gao San Niangzi all have come out and were shocked. They couldn't believe that the person who was shouting and abusing the people from Guangdong had no

martial arts skill.

Lu Zhengping also was scared himself. He didn't expect to kill this person with a single blow. That man was abusing them repeatedly and Lu Zhengping couldn't restrain himself.

The Guangdong people looked at each other in dismay; suddenly they heard a cold voice coming from the roof: "It's good, it's really good. The people from Guangdong really have some skill. Sect leader Lu is really a chivalrous person, he has cut down the servant who serves tea and food with a single blow in to two sections!"

Everyone raised their head and looked towards the person saying these words. They saw a person wearing ashen gown, both his hands on his waist and standing on the roof. They immediately realized that Lu Zhengping had actually killed an inn servant. This person might have given money to that servant to come in courtyard and say aloud those words.

Gao San Niangzi immediately threw three short knives at that person.

That person moved to his left and caught one short knife with its hilt and the other two knives went past him.

He said with a smile: "I will like to meet the honorable people of Guangdong sects in the forest twelve miles north of this town. Hope to meet again!"

As soon as he said these words he leapt in the opposite direction and vanished in the dark. Fan Yifei wanted to follow that person but Gao San Niangzi stopped him and said: "we cannot follow him?"

Fan Yifei nodded and said: "Yes, no matter who opposite party is, we have to keep our appointment."

Gao San Niangzi said: "good, we can't lose our face in the martial arts without facing our opponents clean and fair."

She arrived near the window of Shi Potian's room and said in a clear and resonant voice: "master Shi, younger sister, we have decided to keep the appointment with this person and so we must go immediately. We have to go today but tomorrow we will meet at the bar near the front of the town."

She didn't listen his reply and also said: "The situation here will be very noisy and somewhat unavoidably troublesome, so it will be better for you both to leave this place soon or you might be implicated in this affair."

She did not invite Shi Potian and Dingdang to meet that person. She thought that during the day, he has already fought a fierce duel with Ding Busi and has rescued their lives; if I invite them to go with us again and ask his protection then it will really look bad.

By now the inn master has discovered that the servant is killed and shouted and wrangled and there was a great confusion.

Someone shouted: "Some bandits have killed this servant, save his life, saves his life!" Someone called out: "notify a government official quickly!"

Someone said in a low voice: "be quiet, the bandits have not left yet!"

Shi Potian asked in a low voice: "what to do?"

Dingdang sighed and said: "Anyway we can't stay here now, we can follow these people"

Shi Potian said: "Actually I don't know that who the opposite party is, can it be your fourth grandpa?"

Dingdang said: "I don't know. We can't again disguise ourselves, maybe he is my grandpa?"

Shi Potian startled and said: "this is bad, II won't go."

Dingdang said: "you fool, if it is my grandfather, we will not come out? Your martial-arts is anyway much strong, even my grandpa could not kill you. I did not worry about that but you are still afraid of him. Come on, let's move out quickly"

As she was saying these words they heard the sound of several horse's hoof sound, the Guandong group boldly left from the front gate of the inn one after another.

They only heard the sound of Gao San Niangzi saying loudly to the inn master: "take this money, here two hundred is for the rooms and food and the other two hundred is for the servant's funeral. The one who killed that servant was the Shandong highwayman Wang Dahu so don't implicate other people in this

matter."

Shi Potian asked in a low voice: "how does she know that the killer was that Shandong highwayman Wang Dahu?"

Dingdang said: "that is of course a lie; the officials will be coming shortly so she is just giving them a false story.

They left the shop too by the main gate and saw two saddled horses and thought that the Guangdong people have left them these horses so they too rode the horses and started towards north.

Chapter 15 - The Truth

Shi Potian and Dingdang followed the Guandong people boldly for about ten miles. They saw a very dense pine forest in front of them. As soon as they entered the forest they heard the loud voice of Fan Yifei: "Are the people who invited us are here? We people from Guandong are here and are waiting."

Dingdang said: "we should hide in that thick patch of grass and take a look. Let's see if it is really grandpa." Both people jumped out of their horses and bent their back to approach that place and hid behind a big stone.

As soon as Fan Yifei heard the sound of the horse's hoof, he knew these two people has also come but didn't greet them but concentrated hard on the pine forest ahead. Four of his disciples stood in front, ten disciples stood a little bit ahead of them and the rest of people in same way.

It was extremely quiet in the forest and not one made even a single sound. The moon was not very bright but they could feel the light shimmering out of the pine trees gave a bluish color to the ambience.

After a long time, suddenly they heard a whistling sound from the sentry post. First from right and then from the left a line of men wearing black clothes rushed towards them respectively. Each line had at least around fifty to sixty people and in a moment all the Guandong group was surrounded by about hundred people. They were surrounded but still all of them remained calm and no one attacked but everyone has their hand on the sword hilt.

They saw another ten people coming out of the forest wearing same kind of the black cloths and stood in an array before them.

Shi Potian almost made a light belching sound as he saw these people. These people were the subordinates of the five hall of clan of eternal happiness. He saw Incense-Master Mi Hengye and victorious leopard Zhan Fei coming out.

As soon as these ten people stood he saw one coming out of the forest. He was 'Touch that bring back to life' Bei Haishi. He coughed several times and said: "It's my pleasure to meet the sect leaders of Guangdong.....coughsI didn't want to keep all of you gentlemen waiting but couldn't come earlier....coughsbut

gather so many people and manage them is not that easy.

As soon as Fan Yifei heard him speaking and coughing repeatedly, he understood that this person is the renowned master Bei Haishi and immediately understood that the opposite party is precisely the clan of eternal happiness. He thought that he was afraid these people might be with Ding Busi but once he saw Bei Haishi and other people of clan of eternal happiness he laid down his concern and considered: "It is only the clan of eternal happiness, I was afraid it will be that Ding Busi and his people."

As soon as he again thought of Ding Busi he couldn't restrain himself from shivering once he remembered how they somehow managed to escape his blistering attacks but he knew Ding Busi was nothing compared to the people in front of him.

He said: "Master Bei has come a long way to greet us, how worthy of us? Saying these words Fan Yifei greeted them. Lu Zhengping, Feng Liang and Gao San Niangzi too understood his intension and came forward and greeted them.

Shi Potian saw their polite talks and greeting and thought in his heart: "they are not here to fight." He said in a low voice: "people from both sides are our friend; we should go and meet them."

Dingdang held her arm and said in a low voice in his ear: "hold on for a moment, let's see what is going to happen."

Fan Yifei said to Bei Haishi: "we agreed to visit the clan of eternal happiness and to pay our respect to clan leader but unexpectedly we got delayed in our way. Master Bei is really broad minded, I hope he forgives us.

Bei Haishi said: "Fine, fine....I understand but Shi Bangzhu waited for your honorable presence for a long time and have relinquished the matter of appointment. Shi Bangzhu is anyway inundated by several important matters so he couldn't wait."

Fan Yifei said: "You don't know where the sect leader is? Do you want to say Master Bei Haishi that after coming thousand miles from our home to the central plains just to meet him and we can't meet him. If we can't meet with him....then.... then ...we would we be quite disappointed."

Bei Haishi kept quiet for sometimes and then coughed again and again but didn't answered him.

Fan Yifei said: "We have brought some of the local precious products from Guandong such as several marten skin, several catties of ginsengs to present it to Bangzhu. It's a shame but I will ask Master Bei and your sub ordinates to take these triflings. Although this is such an inadequate gift but our sole intension was to pay our respect so kindly accept these."

He signaled with his left hand and three of his disciples arrived near the horse and loosened three packages from the horseback and respectfully bowed in front of Bei Haishi and presented him these packages.

Bei Haishi said with a smile: "thisThis is too really polite. We can't accept such generous gifts, but...coughs.....but it would be really disrespectful if we deny you so many thanks for this gift, many thanks!"

Mi Hengye moved to take these packages from disciples but Fan Yifei moved quickly towards his disciple and took one of the packages from his back in his hand and held in front of him. He stepped about three steps and said: "In past when honorable Situ Bangzhu was in Guandong then he was really on good terms with us three people and we were really close friends. We didn't forget our friendship with Situ Bangzhu and we will remain friend throughout our life time. This is the millennium ginseng which prolongs the life and is very rare thing. I want to give it to brother Situ."

He held the package with both hands and looked at Bei Haishi but did not hand over the package.

Shi Potian found it quite strange and thought: "Now who is this Situ Bangzhu?"

Bei Haishi listened to Fan Yifei and then coughed several times. He sighed and made a sad face and said: "Ohhh...my Bangzhu Situ, elder brother..." he sighed gain and said: "Some years ago elder brother went through a very unpleasant matter. He was down hearted and lost interest in the matters of the sect and other worldly affairs....coughs..... therefore he has asked Shi Bangzhu to handle the sect matters and has himself moved in to the mountains to live in seclusion. It has quite some time now and we haven't heard any news about him so nowadays younger brother Shi takes care of the sect affairs. Each of these

generous gifts should be now handed over to Shi Bangzhu in my opinion."

As soon as Fan Yifei heard these words, he said: "You don't know where brother Situ is living right now? We didn't know that brother Situ has retired?" His refined language was gradually becoming strict and as a matter of fact it looked as if he was interrogating these people.

Bei Haishi showed a faint smile and said: "We all are only subordinates of Situ Bangzhu. It is his private affair, how can we know. Master fan and all honored guest you people are old acquaintance of Situ Bangzhu, you should be aware that Shi Bangzhu has taken over the command of the clan of eternal happiness."

In just a few words Bei Haishi blamed them of their ignorance. Fan Yifei didn't know what to answer and said: "thisHow do we know about this matter?"

Bei Haishi said: "when Situ Bangzhu turned over the heavy responsibility of leading the sect to Shi Bangzhu, we knew nothing about him. In fact he didn't have reputation in the martial art world and by age too he was really young. To be honest actually a lot of subordinates had their doubt on his leadership skills but after Shi Bangzhu took over he had set several great merits for the local guild. Situ Bangzhu really had a great eye and his knowledge in seeking competent people is really extraordinary.... coughsIf not so, how would we be having with discussion with such honorable heroes from Guangdong, heh!!"

The implied meaning was that if you think that Situ Bangzhu took the wrong decision to give the sect leadership to Shi Bangzhu then it would be disrespectful to both the sect and Bangzhu himself.

Lu Zhengping suddenly said: "Physician Bei, we also actually heard this news in Guandong recently that's why we came to the central plains to investigate the matter."

Bei Haishi said: "If a message travels thousand miles than obviously it will get twisted and incorrect. Actually I don't know what rumor you have heard?"

Lu Zhengping said: "It will be imprudent of us to tell you about the rumors without knowing the truth. This is a very difficult matter for us. Actually we heard a good friend saying that: "Elder brother Situ isis" suddenly his eyes lit up and he said in a clear loud voice: ".....has died in the hands of this evildoer who is now the leader of the clan of eternal happiness. He has actually

usurped the position of this sect leader and is actually very corrupt, obscene and lascivious in nature. This young fellow is really cruel and this friend I am talking about is not someone whose words are empty. He knows Situ Bangzhu from several years in the past and he is well informed about his fame in martial art realm. Situ Bangzhu trusted this young fellow but he has taken advantage of it or...I would say rather taken the liberty to do as he wants."

Bei Haishi sneered and said: "brother Lu, your words are illogical...it looks as though that you have taken the liberty to spout nonsense."

Lu Zhengping got raged in anger and his face turned red. He thought in his heart: "This Bei Haishi really lives up to his reputation. " He loudly said: "It's a internal matter of the clan of eternal happiness and we as outsiders can't ask for an inquiry but we people from Guandong martial art fraternity value the sect very much and we only want to know if brother Situ is alive or not. It doesn't matter if this right or wrong but we will do anything to find what actually happened to him and are prepared to take any actions for this purpose.

Bei Haishi said: "Although I Bei Haishi is good-for-nothing, but in the martial art realm I too have a reputation, not as much as you people but still how can I change my statement? If you honorable people ask me to lie knowingly then I will but then again a lie is a lie. We are all from the martial art realm and we should be warm-hearted to friends but you should understand that this matter is actually unclear and unintelligible....really unclear and unintelligible!"

Gao San Niangzi couldn't restrain herself by the hearing this flattery and ridiculed Bei Haishi and said fiercely: "My brother Situ was killed, I am afraid you Bei Haishi were the chief instigator. We have arrived to the central plains to take revenge for our brother Situ and we won't be going back without completing this job. If you are a real man then come out and accept what you have done. Do you have the courage to say the truth? Tell me how brother Situ died?"

Bei Haishi said: "I have this sickness for so many years, its noisy and troublesome and refuses to die. I have lived a long life and I don't have much left to live for. If Gao San Niangzi wants to kill me then she will actually do a big favor to me."

Gao San Niangzi got angrier and she said: "Thanks a lot, you are an elder in

martial arts realm and you are actually giving this old lady some face but you are still not willing to share the truth. You go and call that young fellow surnamed Shi and then this old lady will ask in front of everyone."

She thought that this Bei Haishi is a wily old fox, if they fight him now then they will be overwhelmed by there sheer numbers. This Shi Bangzhu is after all a young boy. Let me see if he willing to tell the truth, or even from his look, we may get some clue.

Cheng Chong standing beside Bei Haishi suddenly laughed and said with a dirty smile on his face: "just now Gao San Niangzi talked about how our Shi Bangzhu is fond of women. That is true but our Bangzhu is only fond of young and pretty women or gentle and refined girls. If you really want Shi Bangzhu to see you then its okay but...I'm afraidHe won't....ha..haha!"

He said these words in a really obscene way and obviously his expressions were frivolous and the implied meaning was obvious. He ridiculed Gao San Niangzi in front of all these many people by implying she is old and rude.

Dingdang asked in a very low voice: "Elder sister is really good looking and actually is quite attractive, do you like her?"

Shi Potian said: "What nonsense are you talking now! Be careful or you will find holes in you body if she shoots her short knives at you!"

Dingdang said with a smile: "If she shoots her knives at me then will you save me, will you help me?"

Shi Potian didn't reply.

Gao San Niangzi got extremely angry and was shaking in rage. In a flash three short knives moved towards Cheng Chong as if three silver light streaks moved towards him. Cheng Chong dodged these anxiously and said with a smile: "So are you are fancying me now lady?" He opened his mouth to give a dirty and frivolous expression.

Fan Yifei called out quickly: "hold on for a minute!" But Gao San Niangzi was extremely angry by now and she didn't intend to restrain herself. She sent out her short knives one after another, one more quickly then the previous one. Cheng Chong managed to avoid the first six but he didn't manage to evade the

seventh one and unexpectedly it caught him on the center of his right leg, he quickly knelt down to immediately.

Gao San Niangzi sneered and said: "kneel down and beg for mercy?"

Chen Chong too got extremely angry and drew out his sword and attacked her. Feng Liang came forward and parried his blow with his nine soft whips.

Shi Potian saw that now everyone was gearing up for the fight so called out suddenly: "cannot fight, cannot fight! You should see me; you can ask me whatever you want?"

As he said these words, he came out of the hiding, holding the hand of Dingdang in between the crowds. Everyone looked at him and in a swift move Cheng Chong leapt backwards. The clan of eternal happiness gave a thunderous applause to him and bowed in front of him at once and said: "Bangzhu has arrived!"

As soon as Fan Yifei and others heard these words they were extremely surprised and couldn't believe their eyes but the manner in which everyone in the clan of eternal happiness behaved in front of him, obviously this was not some charade. He thought in his heart: "the young master have told his name Zhong Yu, by age too he is really young, his martial arts are is extremely high, so it isn't much surprise that the clan of eternal happiness is relying on his. It's my mistake only that I didn't think about this matter earlier. (Some play of word by Jin Yong; Fan Yifei musing about the letters in Shi and Zhong Yu")

Gao San Niangzi said apologetically: "Shi.....Shi Bangzhu, so actually you are Shi Bangzhu.....You are the sect leader of clan of eternal happiness, we were really reckless. Had we known earlier then there won't have any misunderstanding?"

Shi Potian showed a faint smile and said to Bei Haishi: "Master Bei, I never thought that we will bump into each other in such a manner, these people are my friends, please don't fight with them."

Bei Haishi saw Shi Potian and was extremely happy and anyway he and the Guandong people didn't have enmity originally, so he bows slightly and said: "I didn't manage to handle this situation correctly, it all is my fault. Please accept my apology and withdraw all your weapons."

Gao San Niangzi said: "We heard the wrong criticism of Shi Bangzhu, we only heard that brother Situ was harmed by him so we gathered our people and came to central plains to inquire about the matter. We didn't know that the new sect leader is actually Shi Bangzhu. We have seen that young master Shi is a righteous person and it's highly unlikely that he will harm elder brother Situ. I think that elder brother Situ must have seen the martial art skills and the streak of righteousness of this young and promising hero and he himself would have abdicated the leadership to a more qualified person, actually I think brother Situ was fortuitous to find someone so able to replace him."

Shi Potian didn't know what to answer so he turned to Bei Haishi and said: "this...this...brother Situ...."

Bei Haishi addressed the Guandong people and said: "Situ Bangzhu is living in seclusion in some remote mountain and he is not seeing any visitors. If he starts meeting visitors then there are a lot of people who will queue up to meet him."

Lu Zhengping said: "I spoke rashly to master Bei and offended him and all the people from clan of eternal happiness, really should die for this, please accept my apologies."

As soon as he said these words, he bowed in front of them and clasped his hands and also said: "but Brother Situ and our friendship was really unusual, we have arrived in the central plains just for the purpose to meet him and get news of his well-being. Master Bei you said that Situ Bangzhu doesn't see the bystanders, but we are not actually some bystanders."

As she said these words he looked towards Shi Potian with pleading eyes.

Shi Potian said to Bei Haishi: "Elder Situ, do you know how far he lives? Brother Fan and rest of these people have walked through several passes and spent months to come to central plain just to meet him. They will be really disappointed if they don't do so."

Bei Haishi really felt awkward; he couldn't defy the orders of the sect leader in front of everyone but also didn't want to discuss this matter there so he said: "I am really muddle headed and unable to fulfill my responsibilities as I explained earlier. You people have come from such a long way and extended friendship to Shi Bangzhu and I haven't even invited you for a drink. I don't want the clan of

eternal happiness to lose face in front of everyone because of me so I will invite the fellow visitors who have come from such a far place to come with me to drink a glass of inferior wine, better come late than never."

Shi Potian asked Bei Haishi: "Is our sect not to far from here?"

Bei Haishi was extremely surprised and color drained out of face, he said: "here in the north-east direction, take a short cut to the city Zhenjiang about fifty miles on road."

Shi Potian turned his head to look at Dingdang. As soon as Dingdang saw him, she gave her an infectious smile and put her hand on her lip to keep quiet.

Fan Yifei wanted to ask the whereabouts of Situ Bangzhu but as he heard Bei Haishi about the sect location, he couldn't restrain himself and said: "Since we have come to the central plains then it would be fitting if we can come to clan of eternal happiness and pay our respect."

Immediately everyone set out in the north-east direction, by the dawn they managed to reach the clan of eternal happiness in Zhenjiang. The steward ran and took care of the people from Guandong and gave them attentive reception.

Shi Potian and Dingdang entered the sect together. Everyone was waiting for the sect leader to come back and they were all pleasantly surprised to see him coming back with a beautiful young girl. Some of them thought: "It looks that the sect leader is really fine now. Formerly after that big sickness, his temper changed but now it looks that he is back to his older self."

Shi Potian washed his face and drank a cup of tea, he heard Bei Haishi to be on the other side of the door, he said: "Elder sister, wait for a moment, I have to ask something from Master Bei."

Shi Potian didn't wait for her reply and came out of room and said: "Master Bei, I want to ask you something, what is this matter of Situ Bangzhu?"

Bei Haishi said: "please come along with me."

They passed through the garden and arrived at the altar of chrysanthemum, there was an octagonal pavilion. Bei Haishi waited for Shi Potian to sit down and then only took the seat and said: "It looks that after the sickness even after so many days you are still not able to recall the past matters?"

Shi Potian once listened to his parents analyzing carefully about how clan of eternal happiness might have deliberately made him their sect leader so that they can avert the disaster of 'command of reward and punishment', but Bei Haishi was always extremely respectful and courteous towards him. He remembered that he only saved him on skyscraping cliff when he was suffering from cold and heat energy streams. He was fortunate that Bei Haishi was there at the moment and he only diagnosed the problem. Even though they were acting for their selfish reasons but still he saved his life on that day.

At this moment it will be really awkward to ask him directly about this matter so he spoke frankly and said that he didn't remember the past matter so at least he can understand more about their strategy.

He said: "Precisely, that is why I have asked you Master Bei to tell me everything from the beginning to end and relate to me in detail."

Bei Haishi said: "Situ Bangzhu was originally called Situ Heng, nicknamed eight claws Octopus, he was your teacher's younger brother; Bangzhu, I hope at least you remember this?"

Shi Potian said: "my teacher's younger brother, IDon't remember? What school is that?"

Bei Haishi said: "Situ Bangzhu never mentioned about the origin of his school or his teacher. As a subordinate it felt really inconvenient to ask about it. Three years ago, we helped you to save your life from your own master....."

Shi Potian asked: "saved my life from my master, who is my master?"

Bei Haishi shook his head and said: "it looks that this sickness has a really strong effect on your memory. You even forgot your master unexpectedly. However I too have doubt about this matter but your subordinate actually don't know. When Snow Mountain sect sent Bai Wanjian to assert that actually you are a disciple of their sect, I have my doubts but looking at your martial arts skill I found it pretty different from their sect."

Shi Potian said: "my master? I have kowtowed in front of Grandma Shi and accepted to become the disciple of Golden phoenix sect but that is the recent matter."

He extended his hand to knock his head and thought that what other people are saying and what I know and have seen doesn't match anymore. In his heart, he was quite worried and asked: "So how did I become the sect leader then?"

Bei Haishi said: "When you came here then Situ Bangzhu hired you to become his subordinate and help in sect affairs. At that time there was a great turbulence in the martial art realm. A lot of the subordinates came here to discuss a very important matter, they came here to discuss about 'command of reward and punishment'. Do you remember anything about that meeting?"

Shi Potian said: "'Command of reward and punishment', yes I know about them actually. However I don't remember anything about that meeting. I have absolutely no memories of it."

Bai Haishi said: "All the subordinates actually meets annually, it's a big gathering with all the halls of Zhenjiang and subordinates and their heirs meet on the third day of third month to get together and discuss important matters. Three years ago as I have mentioned they came to discuss how to handle "Command of reward and punishment'. Everyone was prospering at that time and all felt that it is really difficult to escape them this time so they wanted to plan for them in advance. They knew that the envoys will reappear in the martial-art realm again in three years and will start inviting sect leaders."

Shi Potian nodded and said: "Yes...yes... I know the two envoys of command of reward and punishment and their vicious bronze medals. I know that if people don't consent to go then they and their entire sect suffers calamity and everyone is slaughtered. I have seen it with my own eyes."

Bei Haishi shivered with cold and asked: "Bangzhu, you saw with your own eyes, I don't understand?"

Shi Potian said: "Actually I am at fault not to help those people. I saw the flying fish sect and the iron fork sect getting annihilated in the hands of those two people."

In his heart he thought: "oh! Elder brother, second brother, you really have a toxic hands hand."

The flying fish and the iron fork sect were destroyed by those envoys because their sect leaders didn't accepted the invitation and thus the entire sect suffered

because of it. Actually this matter was also raised within the clan of eternal happiness.

Bai Haishi sighed and said: "We too anticipated this problem even at that time. He Xiangzhu raised this issue in front of Situ Bangzhu, although no one can say that his concerns were groundless but as soon as Situ Bangzhu listened, he flew into rage immediately and said that he was provoking people against Bangzhu and is conspiring against him and issued an order him to detain him immediately. Everybody asked for a favor and pleaded in front of Bangzhu. Situ Bangzhu consented that he won't punish him at their face but got him killed in the night quietly and told everyone that he has committed suicide in fear of punishment."

Shi Potian asked: "then for what? Did Situ Bangzhu and that person He Xiangzhu have some enmity towards each other or some hostility that he got him killed?"

Bai Haishi shook his head and said: "That is the actual matter but Situ Bangzhu was not willing to talk about this matter with anyone."

Shi Potian nodded, he was not really intelligent in worldly affairs but now after spending time with Dingdang and his parents, his ability to understand these matters have increased a lot and he was able to estimate other people thoughts. He thought: "Situ Bangzhu knew for sure that if he is invited by these two envoys then either he will be buried in that island for the rest of his life or have to fight them but if he does not meet these two people then obviously he will not be able to save his life. This matter he might have already thought for several years but was not actually willing to mention in front of everyone."

Bei Haishi said: "Obviously numerous brothers knew that He Xiangzhu has not committed suicide but He Xiangzhu was not important but it gave the indication to all the sect members that what is going to happen in future when Bangzhu will actually receive the invitation to go to island of heroes. They were quite certain that he is not willing to sacrifice his life for the sake of others and will trade them for his safety. Numerous brothers at that time had this concern but no one has courage to raise this matter. At that time you bravely stepped out in front of everyone and asked Bangzhu"

Shi Potian said strangely: "I bravely stepped forward and asked him...I asked

him?"

Bei Haishi told him: "Yes! At that time you boldly stepped out in front of the entire sect and spoke in a very refined manner. You said: "Bangzhu, you are the master of the entire sect, you are already farsighted but you should also think about the long term interests of the sect too. When the envoys of Command of reward and punishment will arrive in the martial art realm after some time then how will you react? He Xiangzhu proposed to think about this matter and to think how will deal with it when the time comes then, but Bangzhu you compelled him to commit suicide. Numerous brothers from the sect also feel the same but won't say out of your respect."

Situ Bangzhu turned hostile towards you, he kept drinking wine and scolded immediately, he said: "You shameless young fellow, this clan of eternal happiness has given you place to live, this clan of eternal happiness saved your life when you were injured and running for your life and now you have the temerity to speak in front of me. Who are you to speak in front of me?"

Situ Bangzhu shouted these words in front of you, everyone was frightened and no one dared to stand for you however you were unfazed by this tirade and maintained your refined demeanor and said: "Bangzhu, To accept the invitation from the two envoys of Command of reward and punishment or to decline the invitation, in both cases one dies so what difference does it makes? It doesn't matter how one dies but the important thing in life are loyalty and righteousness. If all the people of the sect die along side you then what purpose will it serve, what advantage do you have in that case? Would you not rather be generous and accept your responsibility and actually follow all the things what you teach all the other sect members."

Shi Potian nodded and said:" These words were actually good and logical too, butbutmaster Bei, I actually do not have such good eloquence skills, I can't believe that I said these words in front of entire sect."

Bei Haishi smiled and said: "Bangzhu don't be so modest. After getting sick, your mental ability has not turned all round. You will convalesce in the future, and your so will you recover your oratory skills such that not only you will be better than anyone in the sect but you will be best in the entire martial art realm."

Shi Potian was half believing and half doubting, he said: "Yes? Fineafter I spoke these words, then?"

Bei Haishi said: "Situ Bangzhu lost the color his face and was shell shocked. He however immediately turned red and patted the table and called out: "quicktie this young fellow and bring him in front of me!" But as he continued to drink everyone looked at you and you looked at them but no one actually moved towards you.

Situ Bangzhu got even more angry and yelled: "Fine so that's it instead! You all have colluded with this boy, you won't do it? Good, if you won't then let me butcher this boy myself."

Shi Potian said: "Did brothers from the sect managed to calm him down?"

Bei Haishi said: "Several brothers refused to accept the order of Shi Bangzhu and in fact no one moved to tie, there was absolutely no sound and everyone waited to see what will happen.

Situ Bangzhu drew out his metal fingernails and moved to attack you immediately.

Situ Bangzhu drew out his metal fingernails and moved to attack you immediately; he leapt to leave his seat and tried to grasp you. You slanted your body and avoided that move immediately. Situ Bangzhu kept on attacking you continually, but you actually managed to avoid each of his moves but did not hit back throughout. Your both hands were empty however Situ Bangzhu had his metal fingernail for which he was renowned in the martial arts. Unexpectedly you managed to avoid about seven-eight moves of his and everyone thought that this was really commendable.

At that time Mi Xiangzhu called out: "Bangzhu, your Shi nephew has avoided your eight moves but hasn't hit back, he reveres you a lot, you are respected gentleman in the martial art realm, how can you kill the person you yourself have saved and you are his teacher's younger brothers. If you kill him then who will ask for help in the future?"

Situ Bangzhu shouted angrily: "Who asked him not to hit back? You have been partial to him in any case, everybody here are of one mind and have gathered here to kill me and have presented this boy to help you to eliminate me, how can

I fail your wishes now?"

He cursed angrily at everyone but his hands did not stop, you kept on avoiding his attack but it was really getting seriously risky for you.

Zhan Xiangzhu called out: "Brother Shi, take this sword!" he threw a long sword towards you. You caught the sword expertly and let Situ Bangzhu to complete three more moves and then said: "Bangzhu, I have let you make twenty moves without retaliating but now you must stop or I have no recourse but to offend you."

Situ got angrier and thought that you are mocking him so started attacking more viciously with his fingernails. At that time in the meeting hall about twenty people loudly shouted with one voice: "Hit back, hit back, or he will kill you!"

You said: "Fine then so be it!"

Then you lifted your sword to parry his fingernails. You two people started this duel and fought very intensely. Everyone saw that Situ Bangzhu was pouring all his strength in his moves but still he was not able to harm you. Finally you made a move resembling to move "to push the boat along", your sword stabbed his right wrist and his fingernails fell to the ground, you retrieved the sword immediately and leapt three steps back.

Situ Bangzhu stood there, his face lost his color and looked towards the brothers in the sect. In a moment he left the meeting hall with blood dripping from his right wrist wound. There was a ghostly silence in the hall as drops of blood made a faint clattering sound. He moved out of the hall in profound grief saying: "It's good, it's really good!"

As he walked out of the hall, all the forty people standing in the hall gazed at him but no one made a sound. As Situ Bangzhu walked out everyone knew that he was not coming back again as he has lost his face in front of the entire sect.

Everybody requested you to take the command of the sect. At that time you said generously: "I am a young boy and I don't have the competency to take this heavy responsibility but we are supposed to meet a disaster in three years time, the two envoys of Command of reward and punishment are coming back so I will take this responsibility and will accept the invitation to avert danger for the sect"

As soon as he said these words the sect members cheered with one voice and prostrated in front of you immediately. Everyone saw you fighting with Situ Bangzhu and was really impressed with your martial art skills. In fact before this encounter, everyone in the sect were convinced that your martial art skills are really average but the way you first avoided the attack of Situ Bangzhu and then defeated him convinced everyone about your ability and as long as you consented to help them to overcome this disaster then obviously everybody stemmed from their own selfishness supported you whole heartedly."

Shi Potian nodded and said: "That's why everyone was so anxious to search me and feared that I won't come back."

Bei Haishi's face turned slightly red and he said: "After you took the leadership of sect you took a lot of new measures and gave various sect members really stern jobs to complete but none ever showed any dissent as everybody thinks it helped to maintain justice and righteousness and they were willing to shed their lives for the sect."

Shi Potian hesitated and said: "Master Bei, it is a matter of past, I could not recall but please do not conceal, what wrong thing have I done?"

Bei Haishi smiled and said: "To say these words might be a blunder, actually it might not be necessarily so. You were a young and refined person before sickness and were frequently accompanied by several females. I think these girls from Dadu (Beijing) were really shameless and might have forced themselves upon you voluntarily but definitely it was never a matter of force. The Bangzhu of Clan of eternal happiness has a reputation of being wise and refined but your affinity towards female is also a part of it."

Shi Potian heard these words and streams of sweat flowed at his forehead. He knew that these words of Bei Haishi were superficial about what he has done in these past few years; definitely they were not such minor faults. He thought his hardship with Dingdang and thought that I can't recall with how many more people do I have this kind of immoral personal relationships? Suddenly he had a thought in his heart: "what if A'Xiu knows about these relationships, I only like her but ...but"

Bei Haishi said: "Bangzhu, subordinate was really ignorant to say these words

to you but I did not know whether I should say these words or not?"

Shi Potian said: "Master Bei you said these because I explicitly asked you, now please be honest with me."

Bei Haishi said: "Our Clan of eternal happiness has been involved in some shameful business but it was inevitable in given circumstances, otherwise how could have we managed the food and the cloths for thousands of our younger brothers and sister in the sect?"

Fine...we are not the heroes as everyone expects we should be but what good are those stinking morality and virtues if the mothers and sisters are starving. Well if a subordinate was doing something wrong than I didn't help him but....let's say we didn't pay any attention so as to maintain harmony and friendliness among the brothers in the sect."

Shi Potian reddens all over the face immediately and felt ashamed as he remembered that Wan Xiangzhu tried to assassinate him that evening when he was recuperating. He in fact accused him of enticing his wife and Shi Potian understood that he might have rightly accused him.

Bei Haishi also said: "Master Ding Busan is really a strange person and his martial arts skills are also extremely high. Bangzhu I advice you to abandon his granddaughter or I think you will be in trouble, although we are not afraid of him but still he is a powerful enemy which we don't want at this moment....."

Shi Potian said quickly: "How cam I leave Ding Guniang?"

Bei Haishi smiled and said: "Bangzhu when you like a girl then you treasure her with all your heart and life but I am afraid you don't have much patience will these girls. Bangzhu you two people are just intimate but nothing else, it isn't as if you two have bowed in front of heaven and earth and have married or something. It will be better to avoid her."

Shi Potian said: "ButBut I actually bowed to Heaven and Earth and got married with her."

Bei Haishi said: "At that time you were recovering from a serious sickness and your memory was blurry. I have seen that people forget things and don't remember correctly after this kind of serious illness."

Shi Potian knitted his brows and found it hard to reply for a while.

Bei Haishi thought that its time to stop talking about this matter so he changed the topic and said: "When the Guangdong people saw you, they were really happy to see you; in fact they started to praise you, their demeanor softened and started saying Bangzhu is this and Bangzhu is that They were singing praise of the virtues and the righteousness of Bangzhu and talking about your extraordinary martial art skills... I don't understand this matter."

Shi Potian told him how he fought with Ding Busi and saved their life numerous times and how they threw a banquet to his honor. The Guangdong people had already praised Shi Potian and his martial art skill and now after listening about the fight with Ding Busi, Bei Haishi was quite surprised and immediately asked how he managed to improve his martial art skill that much. Shi Potian himself was at loss and couldn't reply.

Bei Haishi actually thought that he is not willing to say anything about this matter so he didn't pursued this matter and said: "These people also have some fame in the martial arts world. Bangzhu now that you have helped them so they now a obligation for you. You can seize this opportunity to boss around. I think if they ask about Situ Bangzhu in front of the entire sect then you can simply say that Situ Bangzhu has given the command of the clan to you and have retired and have retreated in seclusion. To tell them about that entire episode wouldn't be such a nice idea and we should try to avoid that uncomfortable situation. In addition telling them the truth won't be any advantage to anybody but might only escalate more feuds between us."

Shi Potian nodded and said:" As you say master Bei."

Two people then started idle talk for some moment. Bei Haishi started reporting about the sect matters. He gave the details of the various sect activities. He reported Shi Potian about all the punishments he gave in the clan and the changes in the steward personnel, he told which village has sent how many silvers and rice, what money has he received from the wharf for these many months.

Shi Potian was perplexed about that much information but he simply kept saying yes and kept on listening. Bei Haishi further mentioned some of the

achievements of some people, he mentioned about some dishonorable deal which came in the light and said that the greenwood villages have delivered the money, pearls, jades and grain to the clan of eternal happiness.

Shi Potian kept on listening but didn't understood most of the things and didn't know what to reply.

In the evening a big banquet was thrown by the clan and the entire Guandong group was invited by Shi Potian with Bei Haishi accompanying him on his right hand seat.

The wine went on for three rounds and various people spoke some modesties. Fan Yifei said: "Benefactor Shi has great ability, he has reorganized the clan of eternal happiness and now it's so prosperous. Brother Situ always wanted it this way."

Bei Haishi said: "Situ Bangzhu was the one who planted the seeds at that time, but now it's us who are enjoying the goods but these are trivial sect matters, we do not dare to talk about them."

Fan Yifei was just looking for an excuse to again inquire about Situ Bangzhu. Suddenly he saw the subordinate from tiger hall; Fu Xiangzhu arrived at side of Bei Haishi in a hurry and whispered something in his ear.

Bei Haishi smiled and nodded, he said: "it's good, it is really very good."

He turned his head towards Shi Potian and said: "Bangzhu I am really pleased to inform you that we have captured the disciples of the Snow mountain sect. These two people have come from the Ling Xiao city to rescue the other disciples of Snow mountain sect we have earlier captured. We actually knew that something like this will happens and were just waiting for the bird to walk itself in the net. We had just caught both of them just a few moments ago."

Shi Potian was startled, he said: "We have captured Snow Mountain disciples?"

Bei Haishi smiled and said: "Previous when that Bai Wanjian came here with his disciple and left with you Bangzhu, we were really worried and only feared that they might treat you unkindly, so....."

Bei Haishi didn't want to say in front of Guangdong people that Bai Wanjian in

fact kidnapped Shi Potian in front of everyone and carried him away so he talked ambiguously about that situation and said: "Our entire gang went out to inquire the whereabouts of Bangzhu, Unexpectedly we bumped in to a group of Snow mountain disciples near Anhui and after a small fight we captured them all, it was only a pity that Bai Wanjian was not there."

Dingdang suddenly asked: "Did that lady Hua Wanzi was also among them?"

Bei Haishi smiled and said: "of course she was in the first batch of people we seized in the sect itself, Ding Guniang was also here at that time, isn't it? That time altogether we captured about seven people."

Fan Yifei thought in his hearts with amazement: "Snow mountain sect has as illustrious prestige in the martial art realm; unexpectedly they were routed by the clan of eternal happiness."

Bei Haishi also said: "We interrogated the disciples of the Snow mountain sect about the whereabouts of Bangzhu. Everybody said that Bangzhu left that temple of the village god in the evening and after that no one has seen him again. Once everyone heard that Bangzhu is well then we all were relieved, now what about these Snow mountain sect disciples, they were here to kill Bangzhu, so what punishment should be given to them?"

Shi Potian deliberately considered: "Father and mother said that I once did obeisance to the Snow mountain sect and accepted them as my school. That way these Snow mountain disciples are my brothers, how can I punish them, forget about the thought of killing."

He said: "We and Snow mountain sect have some misunderstanding, now convert....." he tried to speak an idiom but couldn't remember it and thought for a while.

Bei Haishi pitched in and said: "Convert an enemy into a friend."

Shi Potian said: "Yes, converts an enemy into a friend! Master Bei, I wants to release then and asks them to drink together, is it good master Bei?"

He did not know whether in the martial arts world this is an acceptable custom so he wanted to confirm with Bei Haishi. He also asked because he knew that they had put a lot of effort to capture so many of Snow mountain disciples and

at least he can get his approval rather than acting on his own authority. Although other people revere him to be their sect leader but still he wanted to take everyone in his trust rather than just ordering them to comply with his verbal command.

Bei Haishi smiles said: "Bangzhu is really broad-minded and generous. It is surely a fine precedent in martial arts realm." He then told: "Sends some person to bring in the Snow mountain disciples."

The subordinates complied immediately and soon they came back with the two detained Snow mountain disciples. Both were wearing white clothing. Those two people have their hands tied behind the back and had many bloodstains on their white cloths. Obviously there was a fierce fight and both people were injured.

That subordinate shouted: "Go forward and bow in front of Bangzhu."

That middle-aged person glared at Shi Potian as other sect members started abusing him. He too shouted: "You shameless killer! You do these kinds of evil, you thief, robber, its time to face retribution for the crime, waits for my master to come, he will tear you all in shreds and avenge for me."

Suddenly they heard a loud sound from outside the window and Wangba Dan said in a loud voice: "Younger brother, I really liked your abuse, this guy is really a dog and bastard." But they heard the sound of shackles as about twenty Snow mountain sect people came inside the hall. They were wearing handcuffs in their hand and shackles in their legs but still they entered hall fearlessly.

Geng Wanzhong, Huyan Wanshan, Feng Wanfu, Ke Wanjun, Wang Wanren, Hua Wanzi and several others were among the captured people. Wang Wanren came inside through the gate and said: "You bastard..." and started cursing unceasingly.

Some said: "If we had swords and spears in our hand than we would have killed this young thief right here."

Fan Yifei thought in his heart: "If they have captured these kinds of people than it isn't anything to be proud of."

Bei Haishi glanced towards the Guangdong people and understood that they are thinking of them as cowards because they have shackled these people so he

immediately left his seat and said with a smile: "In Anhui we have to capture all the people this way not because we were concerned about their martial art skill but because we concerned about well being of Bangzhu and that's why we didn't resorted to injure anyone gravely but obviously you people don't accept your defeat and still think of clan of eternal happiness as dirty worm-infested dog. Everyone here obviously in his heart refuses to accept our victory so let's do one thing. I will give you ten moves, so as long as clan of eternal happiness is not able to catch you within ten moves then we are really dirty worm-infested dogs."

On the day when clan of eternal happiness fought with Snow mountain people and captured them, at that time Bei Haishi displayed five lines of six people and started to attack. Ke Wanjun and others cannot get away even two-three moves at that time so ten moves was indeed a tall order. The newly captured Snow mountain disciple actually didn't know about that and he just saw a thin sick looking old man in front of him so he thought why should I be frightened?

He called out immediately: "Your clan of eternal happiness is just relying on its numbers for the victory, what great is that? Let us alone have ten moves, or even if you want hundred moves then so be it."

Bei Haishi said with a smile: "Is very good, is very good! This brother has real courage and is really excellent. We then make a bet, if you meet my ten moves then clan of eternal happiness is a dirty worm-infested dog however if you lose in the ten moves then your snow mountain sect is dirty worm-infested dog, is that good?"

As he said these words, he moved his hands and towards him and broke the thick hemp ropes which were tying his hands in a single stroke and said with a smile: "Please!"

That person was tied up with these ropes for quite some time now and he has tries a lot to break free of them and have struggled many time so he knew that these hemp ropes were very tenacious, but when he saw that this sick looking person has broken the rope with a superficial stoke as if he was breaking a noodle, he was really frightened. Instantly, his complexion changed, his body started trembling and he didn't dare to challenge Bei Haishi.

Suddenly they heard another sound from outside the hall, someone said: "Is

very good, is very good! I accept this bet!"

The Snow mountain disciple heard this sound and immediately their facial expression changed, on the other hand the people from clan of eternal happiness were all surprised, and now the facial expression of Bei Haishi changed.

They heard the sound of something striking the gate and it opened. They saw a highly dignified and heroic looking person coming in; it was indeed 'Frost of the North-west' Bai Wanjian. He held his fist in the other hand to greet them and said: "I don't have much talent but still I will like to meet your ten moves master Bei"

Bei Haishi showed a faint smile, he looked calm but under his heart he actually felt really awkward. Although he knew that he can defeat Bai Wanjian in martial arts but it won't be possible to do this in ten moves, even a hundred moves was also less to subdue him.

He said with a smile: "Ten moves of gambling against the chivalrous 'frost of the north-west', it won't be a nice gamble. We have to change the rules now. If master Bai Wanjian himself is interested than we have to look for at least 300 moves to decide the victory or defeat!"

Bai Wanjian said: "Originally Master Bei you yourself have said these words, now you not keeping your promise."

Bei Haishi said with a smile: "Ten moves of gambling are fine for this mean and extremely arrogant ignorant youth but not for a chivalrous veteran martial art expert like you."

Bai Wanjian said: "If clan of eternal happiness accepts itself as a dirty worm-infested dog then I don't have any problem with that. Obviously you are accepting that your martial art skills are below this mean and extremely arrogant ignorant person isn't it?"

When he entered the hall, he saw Shi Potian beaming and buoyant sitting on the mat and numerous fellow standing in handcuffs and shackles, looking thinly and pale, under his heart he was really angry but still he exchanged few words with Bei Haishi and scolded the sect in front of everyone.

Again they heard some noise coming from the outside of the door; suddenly they heard a loud voice: "Songjiang government officer Yang Guang, master of Xian Su manor Shi Qing and Lady Min Rou are paying a visit." They heard the sound of Shi Qing.

As soon as Shi Potian heard his father's voice, he felt great happiness and leapt up like a spring and called out: "Father, Mother!"

As soon as Shi Potian heard his father's voice, he felt great happiness and leapt up like a spring and called out: "Father, Mother. He rushed towards them but as he glided gently and swiftly nearby Bai Wanjian.

Bai Wanjian moved his hand in a subtle move and tried to harm Shi Potian.

This move was extremely quick and also highly unexpected. Shi Potian was too eager to meet his parents and anyway he didn't have any time to defend so he flung his arm with real strength along with his strong internal strength. Suddenly it was Bai Wanjian who felt severe pain in his arm as if thousands of pins have been inserted all at once and his hand went numb. He at once moved back two steps and stood firm but his face lost all its color.

He only saw Bei Haishi smiling and saying: "Really superb martial art skill!"

However the way he was saying these words meant that not only is he praising Shi Potian but also deriding Bai Wanjian as if saying his skills are low and unrefined."

Everyone saw Shi Potian beaming with joy as he accompanied the Shi couple inside the hall, along side them they saw another old person of big stature, he was walking in the middle followed by five more people. Zhenjiang and Songjiang are not to far so obviously the people from clan of eternal happiness knew about this hero from the south of Yangtze River. He was silver halberd Yang Guang. Shi Potian was calling the Shi Qing couple father and mother. Min Rou held his hand and the way both were talking looked really close so everyone stood up to greet them.

Min Rou raises her head to look at her son and smiled, she said: "Yesterday morning you disappeared after that meeting in the inn, I was anxious what happened. Your father actually was concerned about your safety and actually said that if some people have not abducted you so we came to clan of eternal

happiness to enquire about you and you really are here."

Dingdang saw the Shi couple her face turned red. She actually didn't dare to look at them but still raises up her ear and listened attentively to what they are saying.

She only heard Shi Potian introducing the Shi couple and Yang Guang to Bei Haishi, Fan Yifei and Lu Zhengping one by one. Yang Guang and the other five people accompanying them were also famous masters from that region so everyone from clan of eternal happiness too greeted them. Various people in the martial arts world had heard the name of these people and someone will say "has heard so much about you and glad to meet you" and exchanged this and all other pleasantries among themselves for a long period of time.

When fan Yifei heard that Shi couple were Shi Potian's parent so he was extremely polite and respectful towards them. Shi Qing didn't know him but seeing his more than usual politeness, returned the compliment and treated his with twice more humility and respect.

Bei Haishi suddenly saw the parents of Shi Potian coming out and these two people were not some ordinary people but the famous Shi couple of the Xian Su manor, he was surprised and in fact didn't know what to do.

Shi Potian said to Bei Haishi: "Master Bei, these Snow mountain sect people, where do we put them?" He did not wanted to give a verbal command directly so he asked Bei Haishi to make the decision.

Bei Haishi said with a smile: "As Bangzhu has already decided, we will release these "heroes" from the Snow mountain sect." He put emphasis on the word "heroes" and said these three characters with resoundingly, obviously to ridicule them in front of everyone. He asked around ten people to go and come up with keys to open the handcuffs and shackles. Those people went out immediately and came back with the key and moved to release all the people from the Snow mountain sect from their chains.

Bai Wanjian pressed his sword hilt and said loudly: "Holds on a minute! Shi.....Humph, Shi Bangzhu, master Bei, master Yang Guang, master Shi Qing and Lady Min Rou, we have words to explain, he said: "In our martial arts realm if someone is not good enough then he can take his own life with his sword and

spear but won't lose his face in front of the opposite party. I will prefer to die with a sword in hand then to lose honor and won't regret even one bit but clan of eternal happiness has seized my people with treachery. They have used mean and shameless methods to damage the prestige of Snow mountain sect. Do you really think clan of eternal happiness can enhance its reputation by these deeds?

This master Bei also said something just now, before you people came, maybe you people will like to hear it."

Bei Haishi coughed and said with a smile: "This Brother Bai"

Bai Wanjian said fiercely: "Who is now a dirty worm infested dog! Are you concerned about your face in martial art realm?"

Bei Haishi said: "Our Shi Bangzhu"

Shi Qing interrupted him and said: "Master Bei, my child is really young, his knowledge is shallow, and how can it be possible that he is the sect leader of such a big sect?

He has just recovered from a very serious sickness and has forgotten all the past events. There is some significant misunderstanding, these two characters "Bangzhu", it doesn't look right. This is why I have invited the old hero master Yang Guang and other friends to come at an understanding and resolve this matter.

Master Bai, we are here in clan of eternal happiness to resolve this issue. My unfilial child has already offended you once. These two matters are separate and deserved to be discussed separately. I am known in the entire martial art realm and my word do have some weight and won't say a lie. My child has really completely forgotten the past events."

He again said in a clear and resonant voice: "However, as long as is he had done the matter, no matter he remembers it or not then he will not dare to shirk the responsibility for any offense. I just want to borrow some time to resolve all the matters."

In the several martial experts were present but no one expected that Shi Qing will these kinds of words and in fact there was a ghostly silence in the hall as he said these words.

Bei Haishi said with a dry smile: "Heh heh, heh heh, do you really know what you are saying? Shi Bangzhu" In his heart however he grumbled.

Shi Potian shook his head and said: "What my father says is correct. I am not your Bangzhu, I have said it many times but no one believes me."

Fan Yifei said: "I don't know what the truth is behind this entire thing but I will like brothers in the hall to listen to my words. As far as we know the sect leader for clan of eternal happiness is Situ Bangzhu only, now I don't know how brother Shi ended up as the sect leader?"

Yang Guang has not said much until now but he understood that this is the moment he should speak so he said: "Master Bai, please don't be impatient, who is who and who is not, we can decide this matter in front of everyone" Although he old still when he spoke his voice rang like a mighty bell. As he spoke, his words depicted the power and personality of him and no one dared to refuse him. He said: "All this matter of sentiments can be explained later; first we should free the brothers and sisters from Snow Mountain sect from their chains."

The people from clan of eternal happiness looked towards Bei Haishi and he nodded so immediately they used their keys to open shackles and freed the Snow Mountain disciples one by one.

Bai Wanjian listened to Shi Qing and Yang Guang coming and greeting people. He had come to clan of eternal happiness to rescue his younger brother and sisters. He couldn't help himself to restrain and started ridiculing Bei Haishi in front of everyone as he came. Actually numerous fellow disciples were chained in front of him and he wasn't able to help them. So he scolded Bei Haishi and challenged him for the duel. He was already bracing himself for worst possible scenario as he had no alternative. The Snow mountain sect already has lost their face in front of them and even if his body suffered, even if he was cut in to pieces but he still this time he wasn't willing to suppress his pride.

Unexpectedly the Shi Qing couple came along with Yang Guang suddenly and the circumstances changed in his favor; however he didn't talk too much immediately and observed calmly how Bei Haishi is going to deal with these people.

Shi Qing waited for some time so that the Snow mountain disciples can get out

of their chains and took a seat. He said: "Master Bei, this young child at such a little age, with almost no experience, how can he take the leadership of such a big sect as clan of eternal happiness. Aren't you mocking all the heroes present here?"

Today we have the Old silver halberd master Yang Guang, master Bai and snow mountain sect disciples, the various honorable sect leaders from the Guangdong. I will like to hear the explanation in front of everyone. We have been roaming in the martial art realm for so many years and we too know how this world works, one person does deed and another person have to pay for that. I suspect that some other people are running the sect in the name of my child and he is a victim of some conspiracy."

Bei Haishi said with a smile: "I am not able to understand any of your words master Shi Qing. Shi Bangzhu is the leader of the sect for past three years, it isn't a matter of a single day....coughs ...by no meansWe have heard the name of the famous master Shi Qing and lady min Rou from the Xuansu manor.....Coughswe didn't know that you two are the parents of Bangzhu."

He turned his head towards Shi Potian and said: "Bangzhu, if you didn't tell us that these are your honorable parent, didn't you? Otherwise we would have certainly asked your parents to attend the ceremony when you assumed the leadership of the sect."

Shi Potian said: "III did not know."

Everyone was quite surprised when he said these words. Someone asked: "How can you not know?"

Shi Qing said: "My son went through a very serious illness; he has forgotten about all the past matters and can't even remember his parents, please don't blame him."

Bei Haishi found it pretty difficult to answer Shi Qing at first. The entire clan of eternal happiness has accepted Shi Potian as their sect leader because he has raised the matter of the invitation of "command of reward and happiness" and in fact accepted it. Everyone knew it his heart but obviously no one was going to speak about it directly. Also why should they talk about their internal matters of sect in front of bystanders?

Suddenly he heard Shi Potian saying that he did not know that Shi Qing couple are his parents. He changed the thread of conversation immediately and said: "Bangzhu contracted a serious illness sometimes back, it is true. He was suffering from cold and hot energy streams but that was only more than two months of ago matter. When he came to clan of eternal happiness, he was extremely fit, intelligent and bright otherwise how would he have defeated the famous 'Eight claw octopus' Situ Bangzhu and taken the position of sect leader."

Shi Qing and Min Rou had not listened about this matter from their son and were really surprised.

Min Rou asked: "Son; is this matter true?"

The entire Guangdong crowd also looked towards Shi Potian to listen the truth about this matter.

Bei Haishi said: "We always had this knowledge that Bangzhu is surnamed Shi but if you break the words then (...some play of word again regarding characters in Zhong Yu and Shi Potian). Are you sure master Shi that he is your son?"

Min Rou said: "this is my son and he has learned the principle of admitting mistakes?" Although she was usually polite and courteous but when Bei Haishi implied that Shi Potian was not their son than she couldn't help herself and spoke in an angry voice.

Shi Qing saw that it's pretty difficult to argue with Bei Haishi as he keeps on changing the original matter so it will be better to come straight to the point. He said: "Master Bei, I think there is a conspiracy going on here in your esteemed sect and my son is a ignorant youth is been a victim of it. Actually it's really is a clever strategy to borrow his poor life to save your own lives. You people are afraid that your sect will get an invitation from envoys of command of reward and punishment that is why you have made my son your sect leader, Am I not correct?"

Shi Qing came straight to the point and spoke frankly. In his heart Bei Haishi was raged but tried to keep his calm. His face also changed its color and he coughed several times. He smiled bitterly for some time, buying some time so he can say something in reply.

Suddenly they heard a loud voice of someone laughing and heard a voice: "Everybody is waiting for an invitation from island of heroes? Good, very good, we are here!"

Everyone in the hall stood up suddenly as they saw two people coming in. One person was fat and the other one thin, their clothing and personal adornments were magnificent and expensive. These two people arrived and everyone was taken aback by their sudden intrusion.

Shi Potian saw these two people and was very happy in his heart and called out: "Eldest brother, second brother. I haven't seen you for such a long time, how are you?"

Shi Qing couple has once listened to him mention about these two people and how he swore brotherhood with both these people but when he pronounced "eldest brother and second brother" they were really startled.

Shi Qing said: "So you two have come. I was explaining some things about the clan of eternal happiness. I think you people have come at the right time."

At this time Shi Potian had arrived in front of both people and held his hand and talked to them really intimately.

Zhang San smiled and said: "Brother, so you are the sect leader of this clan of eternal happiness, I am afraid it's not true isn't it?"

Min Rou thought that her child's life and death were hanging in balance and she couldn't restrain herself and said politely immediately: "Yes! The sect leader of clan of eternal happiness is Situ Bangzhu but they have deceived my child to keep off this disaster. Please consider this matter seriously."

Zhang San asked to Li Si: "Second brother, what do you say?"

Li Si kept a sad expression on his face and said: "We have to invite the most deserving person."

Zhang San chuckled and said: "Yes, we three people have sworn brotherhood and have sworn to share the happiness and the sorrows. This clan of eternal happiness wants to keep off the disaster, now this is an interesting situation?"

All the various masters in the hall saw the skill with which Zhang San and Li Si

entered the hall and instantly knew that their martial art skill was much higher. Also these two people have shaken the martial art realm for past thirty years and their presence was really imposing. Everyone lost the color of their face as they witnessed them personally. Bei Haishi and Bai Wanjian were also respected martial art exponents but still they also couldn't restrain the thumping of their heart. However as they listened the talk between them they were really unsure about Shi Potian and their relation.

Zhang San also said: "We two brothers' follow orders to ask people to invite them to the island of heroes but we have good intention in our heart. I don't know why people are not willing to accept our invitation. If someone refuses us then we get extremely disappointed. It's not that we invite only the big and reputed sect leaders. We invite the leaders from big sects and small sect both. This is very good, is very good, is very good!"

He said continually these three words "is very good" and looked around.

He looked towards the Guangdong people and saw Lu Zhengping, Fan Yifei, Feng Liang and Gao San Niangzi and knew that these people too are really scared.

When he looked at Gao San Niangzi, he stared her for a moment and said grinningly: "Is very good!"

Fan Yifei guessed that he has now noticed them so they will also get the invitation now.

Zhang San again said "is very good" a couple of times and thought that its good that he met these people here or he has to climb several mountains and have to cross numerous rivers to find them.

Gao San Niangzi said loudly: "You are staring at me continually and saying "is very good", what does that mean?"

Zhang San laughed and said: "what other meaning can 'is very good' have? If I say 'is very good' than obviously it means that I am appreciating something and that's it."

Gao San Niangzi shouted: "You must kill then kill; this old lady will not accept your bronze medals!" She moved her right hand and with a whistling sound, two

short knives moved towards Zhang San.

The people were startled and couldn't understand why she was attacking despite no formal invitation. In fact they never expected that she wasn't afraid of these two envoys of 'Command of reward and punishment'.

Actually although Gao San Niangzi was hot tempered, but she didn't made this move without thinking. She knew that once these two people are here so obviously they will be invited to island of heroes and they can't refuse and this disaster can't be avoided now but she thought that if all the people in the hall unite against the common enemy then they have a chance. She thought that if clan of eternal happiness, the Guangdong sects, the Snow mountain sect, Old silver halberd Yang Guang and Shi couple all unite then they can defeat them just by the virtue of overwhelming numerical strength.

Shi Potian called out: "Elder brother, careful!"

Zhang San said with a smile: "It is not in the way!" as he had already wielded his sleeves lightly and the two bronze medals flew from his sleeve in the direction of those short knives. The two bronze medals collided with the short knives but still maintained their direction and hit Gao San Niangzi on her out-stretched hands.

The bronze medals were traveling at great speed. As soon as Gao San Niangzi got hit she felt as if entire upper body was hit by thousands of pins. Her hands felt numb and started shaking with pain. She lowered her head and tried to breathe but felt as if he was sucking icy cold air. She felt as if these bronze medals are sucking life out of her body.

She had already listened that if people accept the invitation than they are rewarded but if they refused then are punished harshly. She tried to hold those two bronze medals and tried to consent that she was accepting the invitation but she couldn't move her body.

She said with a dry humor: "Ha, he wants me to.....II will go to the island of heroes....and will eatthat meat gruel..." Her sound was barely audible and extremely bitter and astringent and other people found it really uncomfortable.

Zhang San was still grinning, he said: "master Bei, you are running this sect and deceiving my brother to pretend to be the leader of this sect. He is an upright

honest person and was swindled unavoidably. I and Elder brother Li Si are honest people. If we have to invite the sect leader than how can we invite someone else? If I invited some other person by mistake then what kind of a huge joke will we be? Zhang San and Li Si will lose their face in the martial art realm. This why we investigated this matter really carefully, and have poured huge effort and then only we came here. Brother, do we ask the Bangzhu to come down and accept the invitation?"

Li Si said: "Good, ask him to come down."

He puts out his hand to hold two round stools and threw them at the roof.

They heard a loud sound as the roof dislodge and a big hole appeared immediately. The silt fell numerously and people scattered here and there to avoid the falling debris.

Suddenly the group of people moved aside as if by prior agreement when unexpectedly a person fell in the hall from the roof. This person curled up in same place.

Li Si pointed his left hand index finger towards that person and with a shoo sound; he unblocked the acu-point of that person. That person slowly moved and stood up; he puts out his hand to rub his eyes and looked in all directions.

However the people called out in alarm with one voice, some said: "He, he!"

Some said: "What's wrongHow?"

Some said: "Strangeit really is!"

The people saw that Li Si Ling unblocked the acu-points of that person from a distance without even touching it. This was a profound martial art. No one has ever witnessed such type of thing or even heard about it. They were panic-stricken endlessly but then they saw another Shi Potian standing in front of them, wearing nice fine silks, his cloths were truly magnificent but had a shocked expression in his face.

Then only they heard him saying in surprise: "YouWho are you?"

Zhang San said with a smile: "Shi Bangzhu, you were hiding in a Yangzhou brothel, for several months now, lucky to be in such a boundless love. Master Bei

and rest of them looked for you everywhere and couldn't find you so they asked someone else to pretend as the Bangzhu of this sect but you can't hide the truth from the envoys of 'Command of reward and punishment'. We are inviting you to come to island of heroes and eat Eight meat gruel. Are you accepting our invitation?"

As he said these words he took out two bronze medals from his sleeve and held it his hand.

That person got really scared, he drew back a couple of steps, flutters and said: "II won't go. How can I go?"

Shi Potian said: "Elder brother, thiswhat is this matter about?"

Zhang San said with a smile: "Brother, do you know this person who has the same face as yours? This person is the sect leader of the clan of the eternal happiness. When this person went in to hiding then the clan was desperate to get someone who can accept our invitation so they presented you as their Bangzhu while this person was hiding quietly. Master Bei has no other alternative, so he deceived you to replace him and presented you as their sect leader, but your eldest brother and second brother has clutched this person, so you won't have to be the Bangzhu for this clan. Now you can't blame us, isn't it?"

Shi Potian shook his head and looked steadily at that person, thought something for a long time and said: "Mother, father, Dingdang, master Bei, II have already told you several times that but you won't believe me. He, heHe is the real one."

Min Rou rushes ahead one step, fluttered and said: "YouAre you Yu'er?"

That person nodded and said: "Mother, father, I am here."

Bai Wanjian stepped one step and asked: "Do you also recognize me?"

That person lowered his head and said: "Bai Shishu.....fellow disciples ...I recognize you all"

Bai Wanjian sneered and said: "We too are here."

Bei Haishi knits his brows and said: "These two people have similar

appearances, their height and age is also same, but one is the Bangzhu of the clan of eternal happiness. I won't be able to recognize the real one. This seriously is a big world, every thing is possible, and it's really strange... YouYou are Shi Bangzhu, isn't it?"

That person nodded.

Bei Haishi said: "Recently, Bangzhu suddenly disappeared? We looked for him everywhere. Afterwards some people saw thisthis youth, and said that he is on the skyscraping cliff, so we then went there to invite him, coughedCannot think trulyCoughsit's actually a long story."

The hall suddenly went silent and the people looked at Shi Potian, then take a look at Shi Zhong Yu, two people have quite a similar appearances but if you put them side by side than they were greatly different too. Shi Potian had a slightly dark complexion, his eyebrow were thick, and was inferior to Shi Bangzhu in looks. Shi Bangzhu was extremely handsome person but obviously these were subtle details and not that easy to distinguish. Min Rou looked at both of them and couldn't restrain herself from crying.

Bai Wanjian said: "Appearance may be the same but the sword scar on his leg, how can they be same, I think there is some serious misunderstanding here."

Dingdang also can't restrain herself and said: "This person is false. Elder brother also had a scar on his left shoulder as well....."

Shi Qing was also suspecting these matters for some time so he said: "My child in his childhood once had injury on his buttock by a concealed weapon." He pointed towards Shi Potian and said: "This person has this injury scar on his buttocks. We have verified it once."

Now everyone was looking at Shi Potian and their mind filled with suspicion that who really this person is?

Zhang San said with a smile: "I already told you that these people has fabricated a story to make my brother Shi Bangzhu. Obviously to support their story they might have made those scars on his body when he was suffering from that grave sickness. We all know how good a physician 'Bring back from death' master Bei Haishi is?"

He went near the Shi Bangzhu suddenly and grabbed his dress at his shoulder and left leg. In a moment there were three holes in that person's dress, at his shoulder, left leg and left buttock and revealed his snow white flesh. There were clearly three scars as mentioned by Shi Qing, Dingdang and Bai Wanjian.

The people called out: "Ohhh" as they were astonished with the essence of Zhang San's martial art technique. He grasped him with such convenience and cut the holes in his dress but without injuring him. They saw that his scars were similar to one they saw on Shi Potian earlier when Bai Wanjian came.

Dingdang went ahead to Shi Bangzhu and asked: "YouYoureally are Elder brother Shi?"

That person smiled bitterly and said: "Dingdang, you don't recognize me. I have not seen you for such a long time; I am suffering such heartache. You actually made me feel as if I am in seventh heaven. You don't recognize me still I won't forget you even if we are separated for hundred years...thousand years....forever."

Dingdang listened to his words and knew that he in fact is his lover and started sobbing and said: "YouYou are really are my elder brother Shi. Hethis hateful swindler, He can't even say simple cordial words? I was deceived by him!"

As she said these words to Shi Bangzhu, she reached with her hand and clasped his hand and held him tightly, he showed a faint smile to her. Dingdang felt as if a nice spring breeze was flowing and felt extremely happy.

Shi Potian stepped forward two steps and said: "Dingdang, I already told you several times that I am not your elder brother Shi, youYou never believed me?"

Suddenly he heard a sound and his face was burning near his cheek.

Dingdang slapped him and said: "You are a swindler, oh, oh!" As she said these words she felt a deep agonizing pain in her palm. As she slapped Shi Potian, she also received an injury because of his higher internal energy. She shook her palm with extreme pain.

Shi Potian said: "YouYou are feeling pain in your palm?"

Dingdang gets more angry and said: "You are such a swindler; I don't want to

see your face!"

Shi Potian felt dejected and muttered: "II intentionally did not deceive you."

Dingdang said angrily: "if it wasn't intentional what it was? Your shoulder scar was fabricated and you didn't tell about it, did you?"

Shi Potian shook his head saying: "I did not know!"

She stamped her foot and said: "Swindler, swindler, you get out of the way!" Her face flushed red.

Shi Potian got really sad and teardrops rolled from his eyes. He couldn't restrain himself and drew back.

Shi Qing turned his head towards Bei Haishi and asked: "Master Bei, thisthis young man, where did you found him? It's really hard to plant someone as a sect leader of such a reputable sect. In the martial arts realm there are so many friends and acquaintance but still you managed to do it. Please explain so we actually know what happened."

Bei Haishi said: "This person has a similar facial appearance as Shi Bangzhu and they look entirely alike. You manor master Shi Qing and lady Min Rou are the parents of Shi Bangzhu but you didn't distinguish then as a bystander I have to admit my mistakes, actually it wonder we didn't managed to recognize him?"

Shi Qing nodded in front of everyone but still had doubts in his mind but didn't say anything.

Min Rou said: "My husbands and I have not met my son for many years, he has grown up a lot and it's not easy to identify. However you master Bei are with him for so many years now, you meeting him on daily basis but still you didn't recognize. You are a very astute person master Bei; I don't think you have admitted your mistake yet."

Bei Haishi coughs several times, forced a smile and said: "ThisThis also not necessarily true."

That day in the skyscraping cliff when he saw Shi Potian, he knew at the first glance that this person was not Shi Bangzhu but his looks at quite similar to him.

He was looking for Shi Bangzhu everywhere but apparently he was not able to find him. Suddenly a he got an idea to plant this person as the Bangzhu. Shi Potian was really ignorant and easy to manipulate but he cannot acknowledge these thing in front of everyone so he said: "Shi Bangzhu took over the leadership of the clan of eternal happiness by defeating Situ Bangzhu in front of entire sect. You people are saying that I planted him as sect leader. I don't understand this word "planted"...how does this comes in to picture?"

Shi ZhongYu said: "Master Bei, if the matter has come to this point then, no need to conceal anything. That day I offended you in the Huai'An mansion. You said you will forgive my life and won't say about this matter to anyone and asked me join the clan of eternal happiness. You asked me to ask Situ Bangzhu in the presence of everyone, why he compelled He Xiangzhu to commit suicide, to ask him why he is not willing to meet the envoys of command of reward and punishment."

I asked him: "My martial art skills are pretty low, how can I face Situ Bangzhu?"

He replied that he and numerous other clan members will close him down. After that incident in that hall actually all of you people fell down upon Situ Bangzhu and compelled him leave. Hereafter in all matters, haven't I listened to your Master Bei?

If you wanted me to go east than how dare do I approach west? I felt really shackled and didn't have the appetite for it so I ran away to Yangzhou and enjoyed my life in oblivion. After that I was seized by these two friends in here. They blocked my acupuncture point and put me on the roof. Master Bei, this clan of eternal happiness works as you want it to. I was merely a puppet for show. Please show mercy and exempt me." He was really eloquent and gave systematically the turn of events in his own version.

Bei Haishi's complexion turned pale, he said: "What words did you say at the time you became the Bangzhu of this sect? At the last moment, you actually are reneging on a promise."

Shi ZhongYu said: "Oh, how dare could I refuse at that time? I was helpless and no one to support. Today in front of my parents and other masters I want to say truth."

He knew that the envoys of command of reward and punishment are already here. If he cannot push the blame on these people than he is finished, also he had his parents here, they might help him.

Mi Hengye said loudly: "Bangzhu, your words rather confuse right and wrong. You were the sect leader of this sect for three years, its not a matter of days or weeks, you abused your power, you were merry making, mistreated women of respectable family, has master Bei forced you for that too? You kept on proclaiming to the numerous brothers that you will accept the invitation of command of reward and punishment and in fact you swore an oath to pledge this. If not for this why would numerous brothers from the sect allow you to deliberately create trouble?"

Shi ZhongYu found it hard to reply so he kept on talking to Bei Haishi and said with a smile: "master Bei, your skills are not small; I will live in seclusion and won't annoy anyone now. You asked this boy to come out fortunately from somewhere. This boy's facial expression is similar to me too. He also likes pretending to be others then why asked me in the start to become Bangzhu? Father, mother, this place is really troublesome, we should depart early." He was fluent and clever compared to Shi Potian. The reality was anyone can easily identify them by the manner they speak.

Mi Hengye, Cheng Chong and other people from the clan of eternal happiness called out at the same time. Someone said fiercely: "You want to go out this hall, fine try it but it won't be so easy." As he was saying these words everyone moved their hands towards their sword hilt.

Zhang San laughed aloud and said: "Shi Zhong Yu, Master Bei, we have opened this small window in the roof to speak some frank and straightforward words. Actually the reputation of your Situ Bangzhu and Shi Bangzhu is not that great, to be honest, you are not supposed to get the invitation to the island of heroes. Clan of eternal happiness have been dishonorable and wicked in many matters in the past many years, me and elder brother has arrived at your sect today to actually "punish" everyone and hoped that Shi Bangzhu will not actually accept the invitation but actually it's out custom to invite at least once so I will ask once again, Shi Bangzhu, are you accepting the invitation to island of heroes? Good, extremely good, extremely good! You are not accepting it then!"

Bei Haishi and the rest of the people from clan of eternal happiness were shocked as if their heart popped in their mouth. They knew that if Shi ZhongYu doesn't accept the invitation then they have to fight these people. After listening to this fat person, they actually understood that their primary intention obviously is to exterminate the clan of eternal happiness. The enemy of the enemy is a friend but in this case if Shi ZhongYu is not willing to accept the invitation than, how is that good?

Instantly, in the hall there was not a single sound. Everybody was looking at Shi Zhong Yu.

Shi Potian said: "Master Bei, elder brotheryou must not do as you have done earlier, it's not good to kill so many people as you have done at the flying fish sect and the iron fork sect. There you exterminated each and every person. It doesn't matter what good it does but please take down those bronze medals first, so as to avoid bloodshed. Both sides are good brothers and should talk and resolve this matter."

Bei Haishi said: "Yes, Shi Bangzhu, You don't have any other alternative but to accept this bronze medal."

Shi Potian said to Shi ZhongYu: "Shi Bangzhu, you have to accept these bronze medals. If you accept than only you have to go to island of heroes but if you won't than everyone will die along with you.....Don't you have a heart?"

Shi ZhongYu sneers at him and said: "You ask me to generous to these people. Actually to say these words are easy but to walk the talk is a different matter altogether. You are already talking so much about justice and humanity that a Bangzhu should take responsibility and keep off the disaster to help the sect, so why don't you yourself accept these two bronze medals? Now is it funny?"

Shi Potian sighed, looked at Shi Qing, Min Rou and Dingdang, and said: "Master Bei, numerous brothers and sister from the sect have their hopes on me that I will make this disaster disappear, I may not be the Bangzhu of this sect but I am ready to accept these bronze medals and the invitation to go to island of heroes!"

As he said these words he puts out a hand to take hold of the bronze medal.

As he said these words he puts out a hand to take hold of the bronze medal.

People were completely stunned.

Zhang San took back his hand and said: "Hold on a minute!" He turned towards Bei Haishi and said: "this invitation of bronze medals to island of heroes is not for everyone, we can hand it only to the Bangzhu of a sect. Does your sect accept him as your Bangzhu?"

Bei Haishi and others could not believe that Shi Potian after seeing through various people's schemes and tricks is still willing to accept the invitation to save their lives. Although these people were crafty and fierce, but spontaneously everyone felt a sense of gratitude, and as if by prior agreement they bowed to salute to Shi Potian and said: "We are willing to present sect leadership to this chivalrous person, we will accept all his commands and won't dare to disobey." These words were actually said with extreme sincerity.

Shi Potian returned the salute and said: "Does not dare, does not dare! I didn't understand the matter earlier and spoke incorrectly, please do not blame me that."

Bei Haishi and others said: "We don't dare Bangzhu!"

Zhang San smiled and asked: "Brother, what is your surname?"

Shi Potian shook his head at loss and said: "I really did not know." He looked at Min Rou and Shi Qing and saw them looking at him with same look as if nothing has changed, he couldn't restrain himself from getting emotional and said: "Iam surnamed Shi!"

Zhang San said: "Good! Shi Bangzhu, please accept the invitation from the island of heroes to eat "Eight meat gruel" on the eight day of last month."

Shi Potian said: "I will visit both elder brothers on that day."

Zhang San said: "Depending on your martial art, you deserve to eat that bowl of gruel however it's a pity that you are actually the Bangzhu of clan of eternal happiness."

Li Si shook his head and said: "it's a pity, what a pity!"

They showed their disappointment to everyone as if saying that they are really disappointed that they didn't get the opportunity to kill all the people of this

sect. Bei Haishi and others lowered their head and did not dare to face the stare of Zhang San and Li Si.

Zhang San and Li Si looked at each other and nodded. Zhang San moved his right hand and threw the two bronze medals at Shi Potian. The bronze medals were pretty heavy, as he threw it towards him a swoosh sound was created but it moved in the air really slowly as if it is attached to a string. People again wondered about their extraordinary internal energy and skills, actually no one has seen or heard this kind of rare skills.

Everyone looked at Shi Potian. Min Rou called out suddenly: "Child, don't accept it!"

Shi Potian said: "Mother, I have already consented."

He extended both his hands and caught the bronze medals, turned towards Shi Qing and said: "FatherNoMaster Shi.....When you met your fellow disciples from the Shan Qing temple, you insisted on accepting the bronze medal and going to the island of heroes despite perfectly knowing the danger.....I have also learnt from you and will follow you."

Li Si said: "Good! This is a heroic gesture; we did not swear brotherhood with you in vain. Brother, we spoke these words in front of everyone and people might think that we are impartial towards you but we cannot look after you especially in the island of heroes."

Shi Potian said: "This is obvious."

Li Si said: "Here we also has several bronze medals, we are inviting master Fan Yifei and master Lu Zhengping to the island of heroes to eat "Eight meat gruel". Are you people accepting it?"

Fan Yifei looked at Gao San Niangzi and thought: "She has already seen the result after not accepting the bronze medals at first. At least one person of us is surviving. Anyway what's the point of refusing now and then waiting in Guangdong for the total annihilation?"

He said immediately: "We are really indebted to be invited to the island of heroes by you two esteemed gentlemen, how can I surname Fan dare to forfeit? Also its still about two months for the last month, even if I refuse than still I get

about two months to live....isn't it."

He stepped up and received the bronze medals from his hands. Lu Zhengping too followed him and accepted the bronze medals.

Zhang San and Li Si held their fist in the other hand to salute and said: "Everyone accepted the initiation, many thanks."

He turned to Shi Potian and said: "Brother, we still had long journey, today we may not be able to drink with you together, and we will say our goodbye."

Shi Potian said: "We won't drink three bowls of wine that might be well but we can at least drink from the bottle gourds, is it fine elder brother?"

Zhang San said with a smile: "Ohh...No! This kind of liquor is very difficult to get and if we finish it than we will have empty bottle gourds, now what good will that do? Good, younger brother, elder brother, we will drink three bowls of wine."

The people from clan of eternal happiness immediately brought wine for their Bangzhu and poured it in three bowls for Shi Potian, Zhang San and Li Si.

Shi Qing moved towards them and said in a loud voice: "We Shi Qing and Min Rou are people of low skills but still we will really appreciate if you can also invite us to the island of heroes to eat "eight meat gruel".

Zhang San thought: "For more than 30 years, in the martial arts world whenever someone hears about the invitation from the island of heroes than he is most frightened, today some people are unexpectedly voluntarily accepting the invitation, there is a first time for everything."

He said: "Master and madam Shi, I am really sorry. You two are from the Shan Qing sect and we have already invited the sect leader so we can't invite you separately, we can't even invite old master Yang Guang."

Bai Wanjian asked: "you two still have a long journey to make, whetherWhether you are going towards the Ling Xiao city?"

Zhang San said: "Master Bai predicts with great accuracy, we two people were just about to go to visit your father old Hero Master Bai."

The color left Bai Wanjian's face immediately; he started to speak but

hesitated, and after half a day, said: "Good."

Zhang San said with a smile: "Hero Bai, if you go quickly than maybe you will even have the opportunity to say Goodbye....ha haha haha!!"

He said his hand the two people turn around and slowly moved out.

Gao San Niangzi scolded: "these turtles ...!" She again moved her left hand moved and she threw four short knives at the two people from behind. She knew perfectly well it will be really difficult to wound these two people, but in her heart, she was too angry and resentful towards them so she threw those knives.

She saw that these two knives almost reached their back and they were not conscious that they have been attacked.

As soon as Shi Potian saw it he called out: "Two elder brothers, be careful!"

They heard his voice both of them moved forward with amazing speed and the short knives moved outside the main gate and disappeared without a trace.

These short knives were special projectile weapons which when shot by hand gains enormous speed but the way these two people moved, they were faster than these projectiles and people were again shocked to see their skills and they looked at each other as if they had just seen a ghost and demon.

Gao San Niangzi still scolded: "turtles.....", and said many abusive words but her voice was really low.

Shi ZhongYu took the hand of Dingdang and tried to slip through this gathering but as Gao San Niangzi threw her knives, everyone saw unconsciously towards the main gate and saw them leaving.

Bai Wanjian shouted fiercely: "Halt!"

He turned towards Shi Qing and said: "Master Shi, you confessed about your son sometimes back!"

Shi Qing said: "I have lived my life but now having such sonwhat words can I say? Master Bai, we husband and wife will take our son to Ling Xiao city ourselves and he will face the punishment from old Master Bai."

Bai Wanjian and Snow Mountain disciples were all surprised. They thought that earlier these were ready to rescue their false son but now when they have

met their real son then they have in fact consented to take him to the Ling Xiao city. Are they planning to cheat?

Min Rou looked at her husband; Shi Qing too looked at her. She looked really sad and mournful and he couldn't endure to look at her again. He had already decided and didn't want to have a second thought about this matter. He thought: "Originally we thought that our son is involved in some conspiracy and framed by these people from clan of eternal happiness and we will come and try to save him from this disaster, such moral behavior, oh!"

These two people met Shi Potian then he was recovering from that sickness. His memory wasn't great and his speech too was also ridiculously childish but his instincts were sincere and innocent. As they spent more time together they understood that he really has a good heart and really liked him. Min Rou went ecstatic to meet her son. Shi Potian didn't have much understanding of worldly affairs; she thought that this child was the same one who left them years ago. Unexpectedly when the real Shi Zhong Yu appeared, although the appearance was similar, his behavior was actually completely different. He was crafty and timid and they were really ashamed of him.

Min Rou was really disappointed with her son but still he was their own child, how could have she just leave her. She called out: "Son, come here!"

Shi Zhong Yu came near her, smiled and said: "Mother, I have met you after so many years, I really missed you. Mother, you are looking more and younger as you grow older, if anybody see you with me then they will think that you are my elder sister, not my biological mother."

Min Rou showed a faint smile but in her heart she thought: "This child is really glib." But she smiled to avoid showing her real emotions.

Shi Zhong Yu said: "Mother, several years back I once found a pair of blue jade bracelet, I always keep it me and thought that the moment I will meet you, I will gift you those." As he said these words he pulled out a pair of jade bracelet and a setting a pearl head ornament. He gave the jade bracelets to his mother and turned towards Dingdang and gave the pearl ornament to Dingdang.

Min Rou liked that jewelry a lot. It was really attractive but she understood that his son was a lecherous person and he carries these kinds of expensive gifts

to lure girls and whenever he sees beautiful women than he will take out a present to win favor.

Shi Zhong Yu turned around and inserted the pearl head ornament on Dingdang's hair, smiled and said in a low voice: "These hairs deserves ornaments ten times better but at present I don't have anything else so you have to put up with it for the time being."

Dingdang felt really happy and said in a low voice: "Elder brothers Shi, you always say these words."

She put out her hands and gently stroked the pearl ornament and looked towards Shi Zhong Yu.

Bei Haishi coughed several times and said: "Old hero Yang Guang, Master Shi, Madam Min Rou, numerous heroes from Guangdong and Snow mountain sect, there was all sorts of misunderstanding and acrimony among us. Let's drink wine and leave all these words and feuds behind."

But Shi Qing couple, Bai Wanjian, Fan Yifei, and everyone else each have their your concerns. They thought: "The disaster has just left your doors and you want to make merry, who is in the mood to drink your wine at this point of time?"

Bai Wanjian first said: "The two envoys of Island of heroes have just left for the Ling Xiao city, we must hurry back immediately. Master Bei, we apologize to decline your offer."

Shi Qing said: "We three people must also go together with the Snow mountain sect people."

Fan Yifei too said his goodbye and said that he must return Guangdong early, however he didn't say it directly but people understood that they want to hurry back and take care of their sect matters before going to island of heroes.

The group said goodbye immediately to everyone. The face of Shi Potian turned pale as the visitors prepared to leave. He felt really miserable in his heart. He thought: "I told them earlier that they are making a mistake, I told to Dingdang, Master Shi, and Madam Min Rou, now I everyone is leaving. Suddenly it looks I am again alone in this world, yesterday I had a mother and father but now no one wants me, Dingdang doesn't wants me, Grandma Shi doesn't want

me, A'Xiu doesn't want me!"

Fan Yifei came to him and expressed his gratitude again and again.

Bai Wanjian said: "Shi Bangzhu, we have offended you several times, I don't deserve it but still I request you to forgive me. Shi Bangzhu, you are a real chivalrous person, you helped us on the Azure mist island to fight against those evils. This time we are going but if we keep our life then we will come back and will become friends in the future"

Shi Potian said yes but in his heart he wanted to cry out aloud.

When Shi couple came to say their good bye, Shi Potian saw them with extreme sadness and melancholy. Min Rou saw him and felt really bitter in her heart. She wanted to say to him that they want them to accept him as their adopted son but then she thought that he is now the Bangzhu of a reputed sect of the area south of Yangtze River. It wouldn't be appropriate to say these words so she said: "Shi Bangzhu, earlier when we met, we husband and wife had mistaken you and really disrespected you, I only hopeOnly hope that we will be in good terms even after we say goodbye."

Shi Potian said: "Yes, yes!" He gazed as people departed. He kept on staring until the image of last person sublimated in the horizon.

Bei Haishi was ashamed and also extremely grateful. He and other people from the group didn't manage to say anything to Shi Potian as they thought that he has accepted the bronze medals now and his last time is not that far. No one dare to speak in front of him and gave him his space. They thought that if the leader has the temperament to send himself to death for good of everyone then what else can one want?

Chapter 16 - Ling Xiao City

That night, Shi Potian went to bed early but all the night he kept on tossing on his bed and all his dreams were kind of blurry.

In his sleep, he heard a voice from the window; suddenly he woke up and remembered that Dingdang used to come this way earlier. He hurriedly moved towards the window and said: "Yes, Dingdang...." Suddenly he stopped; sighed and thought: "Am I going crazy? Dingdang has already left with elder brother Shi, how can I see her again?"

He again saw the window to shove open slowly, a slender person appeared and leapt forward gently, and she smiled.

Shi Potian was shocked, he asked: "Are you Dingdang?"

She arrived inside and said with a smile in a low voice: "Have you forgotten me?"

Shi Potian was pleasantly surprised; he said: "Youhow are you here?"

She said: "I was worrying about you, look at you.... What's wrong; this is unacceptable?"

Shi Potian shook his head and said: "You had found your elder brother Shi, now you have come back, I don't understand it?"

Dingdang said with a smile: "Oh, I was angry earlier? Elder brother Shi, I even hit you, are you angry with me?" As she said these words she extended her hand and gently caressed his cheek.

Shi Potian smelled a sweet fragrance, he felt as if someone was applying some ointment on his checks and gently stroking it. He cannot help but got confused, he spoke haltingly saying: "I am not angry, Dingdang, you do not need to visit me again. You have admitted your mistake that is enough; everybody do things in their own manner, so long as you don't think I am a swindler; that is good."

Dingdang said: "Young swindler, young swindler! Oh, if you are really a swindler, perhaps I would have instead liked it.

Elder brother Shi, you are an unusual honorable gentleman, you bow to

Heaven and Earth to get married with me, throughoutHas not regarded me as your wife."

Shi Potian shivered and cannot help but felt ashamed, said: "II am not an honorable gentleman! I did think that way....I don't dare! LuckilyLuckily we did not did anything, otherwiseotherwise....."

Dingdang stepped back one step, sat above the sides of the bed and put both her hands on her face and started sobbing and weeping suddenly.

Shi Potian was really flustered, he asked her: "What's wrongWhat's wrong?"

Dingdang said: "II know that you are an honorable gentleman but othersOthers actually do not think so. Even if I jumped in Yellow River still I won't come clean now. Shi Zhong Yu said.....He said that I have done obeisance to Heaven & Earth, have stayed in the room, he is not been willing to live with me."

Shi Potian stamped his foot saying: "ThisThis is not good? Dingdang, you do not need to worry, I will tell the truth to him. If I tell him that we didn't have any relation and I only respected you than..... may be."

Dingdang smiled through the tears, said: "Respected me as any other Husband and wife will respect each other...no this won't do."

Shi Potian said: "Sorry, I spoke incorrectly. I listened to other people saying these words and actually did not understand their true meanings."

Dingdang cried and stamped her foot gently, she said: "He has a mortal hatred for you, if you said to him than also he will not believe you."

Shi Potian thought in his heart: "He does not want you, I may probably want you." But he knew that these words were not right so he started babbling and only managed to say: "This won't work then what? Oh, I am not good; I am not good at anything..."

Dingdang said: "He is without family or friends but all of them like you, you also do not have graciousness like him but instead you have bowed to Heaven and Earth with his beloved and enjoyed the wedding festivities, why won't he hate you? HeIf he was not Shi Zhong Yu but Fan Yifei or Lu Zheng Ping then you would have saved his life, however in this matter you didn't raised a single

voice.."

Shi Potian nodded and said: "Yes, yes, Dingdang, I feel quite sorry. We must think of a way. Why don't you try to get help from your grandpa? If you ask your grandpa and explain this matter then he might help?"

Dingdang stamped her foot and cried. She said: "Useless, useless. Heby the time he will reach there, Shi Zhong Yu will be already dead. We don't have much time. If I had enough time than don't you think I would have gone to him?"

Shi Potian was in great surprise, he asked: "Why don't have Shi Zhong Yu that much time, how can he be dead so soon?"

Dingdang said: "Snow mountain sect sent that Bai Wanjian to apprehend him earlier and by mistake captured you, luckily grandpa and I saved your life. If he detained you and managed to bring you to Ling Xiao city then at this moment you would have already been dead. Don't you remember?"

Shi Potian said: "I certainly remember. Oh, this is not good! Master Shi Qing had advocated peace with Master Bai and is himself delivering him to Ling Xiao city..."

Dingdang said: "Snow mountain sect hates him. As soon as he enters the Ling Xiao city, he won't come out alive?"

Shi Potian said: "yes, the snow mountain sect has been sending people from time to time to seize me; this matter is really not a small matter. Perhaps however the Shi couple might be able to talk to them and resolve this issue."

Dingdang clenched her teeth and said: "Do you think this matter is so easy to resolve? They will only scold him and leave him to go? Why do think that they are detaining him hundreds miles far away and bringing him back to the Ling Xiao city? The Snow mountain sect has been trying to apprehend him for years now. Do you know how many people have died for this?"

Shi Potian felt drops of cold sweat running through his back, the snow mountain sect has sent so many people to capture him and a lot of people were really dead and wounded. He knew that Shi Zhong Yu has offended them in a big way that's why entire Snow mountain sect is looking for him and is ready to live

and die.

Dingdang said: "Elder brother Shi really has a lot of faults but it would be a real pity if Shi Qing couple too will die with him. These two people are great chivalrous and kindhearted, it shouldn't happen to them."

Shi Potian jumped up immediately and said: "YouWhat did you say? Are master Shi and lady Min Rou is in danger too?"

Shi Qing and Min Rou were the people who took care of him for so many days and really loved him. Although they have admitted their mistake but in his heart, actually he still treated them as his parent so when he heard that these two people are in danger than he couldn't restrain himself.

Dingdang said: "The Shi couple are parent of Elder brother Shi but they are going along with elder brother to Ling Xiao city and are bringing death on themselves. They are hoping to ask favor from Elder Bai. However old gentleman Bai will certainly not consent and will kill elder brother Shi. The Shi couple cherish their son with all their heart, whatever be the mistakes of their son but how can a mother or father see him die in front of their eyes so obviously at the critical moment, things will be resolved by violence. Ling Xiao city is the base of Snow mountain sect; even if the martial art skills of the Shi couple are high still these three people won't be any match to them. Oh... I remember Madam Shi looking and talking to you. She really likes you and care for you; perhaps even as your real mother would have. SheShewill die unexpectedly in the Ling Xiao city, this is really sad." As she said these words she covered her face and wept.

Shi Potian felt as if his entire body is on fire, he said: "The Shi couple are in real risk once they enter the Ling Xiao city, I must hurry to the rescue them. Even if I save them then still it won't be good, I will rather accompany them my entire life, Dingdang I am going!" As he said these words he moved towards the door in big strides.

Dingdang pulled his sleeve and asked: "Where are you going?"

Shi Potian said: "I am leaving tonight only and will try to catch up with the Snow mountain sect and the Shi couple by the time they reach Ling Xiao city."

Dingdang said: "Old hero Bai have very powerful martial art skills, coupled with

his son, Bai Wanjian, "Wind & Fire Dragon" Feng Wanli and so on...there are several martial art exponents in Ling Xiao city. Your martial arts is good but how will you avoid those poison meshed arrows of Snow mountain sect, they will overpower you just by their numbers. If you enter into their trap, then despite all of your skills you will starve to death."

Shi Potian said: "They also shouldn't go there too."

Dingdang said: "You are in rage and in your anxiety you will rush to Ling Xiao city and lose your life but will that save the lives of Shi couple? If you die, you won't know how sad I will be... I can not live by. "

Shi Potian suddenly heard saying these words and couldn't restrain his heart from jumping madly, he said: "Are you ... Why are you so good to me? I am not your elder ... your real elder brother Shi."

Dingdang said: "You two look exactly the same, in my heart, I found no difference, not to mention that we have met several times and you always treated me so well. "These sentiments will live" that's the words everyone uses, isn't?"

She grasped his hands and said: "Brother Shi, you promise me, you won't die whatever happens"

Shi Potian said: "But I have to save Manor master Shi and his wife."

Dingdang said: "I am saying these words but don't be suspicious towards me. Please don't think that I harbor malicious intentions."

Shi Potian said: "Why will I think that you have ill will?"

Dingdang said with hesitation: "Elder brother Shi, If anyone hears that I am asking you to save the Shi couple then they will think that I am ensnaring in to a trap. No, this matter can not do so."

Shi Potian said: "So what is the other way in the end? If we don't do anything to help manor master Shi Qing and Lady Min Rou, it will be really bad."

Dingdang said: "Elder brother Shi, if you really want to hear this plan than listen however please say frankly if you don't want to follow this one and I won't ask about it again. Firstly do you know that why Snow mountain sect hate Shi

ZhongYu so much and want to kill him? "

Shi Potian said: "It seems he was disciple of the Snow mountain sect and he committed a big folly. I don't know for sure but from what I heard, he has violated the young lady of Master Bai Wanjian and she committed suicide. Old master Bai was really angry and as a punishment his own teacher "Wind and fire dragon" Feng Wanli cut his own arm. I don't know what else he has done."

Dingdang said: "Yes, precisely because many people lost their life and reputation they will also kill him in revenge. Elder brother Shi, you have not violated the young lady of master Bai, isn't it?"

Shi Potian said:" Me? I certainly did not. I have not even seen her."

Dingdang said:" this is it. I knew that this will work but it's very difficult too. You have to go to the Ling Xiao city and in place of Shi Zhong Yu with Manor master Shi Qing and his wife. So when they are going to kill you, you tell them the truth, Tell that you are not Shi Zhong Yu but Gouzazhong (Bastard).

They want to kill Shi Zhong Yu but not you. They might threaten you, will say that you are trying to deceive people but will eventually release you. They won't kill you and so Master Shi Qing and his wife too won't forfeit their lives. "

Shi Potian thought and said after some time: "This is actually a very good way to resolve this situation but Ling Xiao city is far in the Western mountains, hundreds of miles way and Master Bai and Shi couple are riding together, I'm afraid I'm afraid if I said anything than they will recognize me and I will be exposed. Dingdang you know, you know..... I am stupid and not good with words where as... this Shi Zhong Yu, he is really bright." He said these words but couldn't help but to feel dejected.

Dingdang said: "I have thought of this. You only need to put some throat medicine so that your throat swells up, pretend that gave you have a large sore and you are no longer able to speak. After the swelling goes down don't speak at all and pretend that you have become a mute." As she said these words, she sighed and slowly: "Brother Shi, this way is really wonderful but it isn't easy. You are really wonderful, you know, I will rather die but won't let you face any grievance. "

Shi Potian listened to her talking so on affectionately about love and life and at

this time, he thought he is even willing to die let alone just a mute, he moved forward courageously, and said immediately: "Is very good, this idea is really wonderful!"

How will I then trade place with Shi Zhong Yu?"

Dingdang said: "They are staying right now in a small town nearby. If we hurry then we can reach there before dawn. I know that Shi Zhong Yu is staying in which room, we will go quietly and he will change the clothing with you. Tomorrow morning you groan loudly and say that you have a malignant ulcer in your throat. After this until they really want to kill in Ling Xiao city, just don't open your mouth and speak to anyone."

Shi Potian said: "Dingdang, this is a good method."

Dingdang said: "You may not speak with anyone all the way, may not be too intimate with the Shi couple too. Master Bai is a very astute and fierce person, so long as you won't give anything, he will suspect you especially after that incident in temple of village god when I and grandpa rescued you. Oh....Shi couple are such chivalrous people, if they get killed in the Ling Xiao city....." She shook her head and sighed.

Shi Potian nodded and said: "Don't worry, I will pay full attention and won't let anyone kill them. Fine, let's go then"

Suddenly the door was pushed open and a female sound called out: "Young master, you are getting deceived by this person!"

In the dim light, he saw a young girl standing in the entrance; he was actually his maid servant Shijian.

Shi Potian said: "Elder sister Shijian.....who is deceiving me?"

Shijian said: "I heard what she said from the adjoining room. This Ding Guniang is restless and doesn't have good intention, sheShe wants to rescue her elder brother Shi Zhong Yu and using you as a scapegoat."

Shi Potian said: "No! Ding Guniang is helping me to think of a way to save manor master Shi Qing and Madam Min Rou."

Shijian anxiously said: "Young master, think again, she doesn't have any good

intention for you."

Dingdang sneered and said: "Good, you really helped the Bangzhu of your sect by asking him to accept the invitation from Island of heroes and now you are trying to sow discord between two people."

She turned her head towards Shi Potian and said: "Elder brother, do not reason with this lowly person, you go and ask Chen Xiangzhu to get hold of some sedative incense. After that, do not come back here again, I will wait for you outside at the front gate."

Shi Potian asked: "Why do I need sedative incense?"

Dingdang said: "Meet me at front gate and then I will tell you, fine now go quickly."

Shi Potian said: "Yes!" he moved quickly out.

Dingdang sneered at Shijian and said: "You little girl, your conscience is really boring!"

Shijian felt that something was wrong and turned to run away but how could Dingdang let her go. She caught her by her hair and hit her with her double palm technique in her chest and killed her immediately.

Dingdang immediately moved towards window to escape then suddenly remembered to clean this up so she turned round and pulled Shijian to bed. She also pulled down her clothing so that her lower part of her body was bare. She then put the brocade quilt to cover. She thought that when the people from clan of eternal happiness will see this than obviously they will think that she tried to resist Shi Potian and was killed by him in anger. In that case Bei Haishi and others will only try to cover up this incident and will not investigate this matter to evade shame.

She left the room and quietly reached to the front gate outside, after some time Shi Potian too came and said in a low voice: "I got it."

Dingdang said: "Good...let's move now!"

Both people arrived at the riverside and boarded the boat.

Dingdang held the oar to traverse several miles and then abandoned the boat.

They came ashore and saw that two horses are already tied under the willow tree and already saddled.

Shi Potian said: "You think really thoroughly, you have prepared everything in advance including the saddles."

The complexion of her face changed and she got angry and said: "What is thorough? This is my grandfather's horse; I did not know that you will be so anxious to save the lives of the Shi couple."

Shi Potian did not understand why she is angry suddenly, does not dare to say anything and rode the horse. Two people quickly covered the distance and reached that small town where they were staying. They left their horse outside the town and sneaked into the town.

Dingdang led him to the inn they were staying and said him in a low voice: "The Shi husband and wife are resting in the east wing of second floor."

Shi Potian asked: "They all are in the same room. Are they afraid that the Shi Zhong Yu will try to escape?"

Dingdang said: "Humph, the parents are fearing that their son will run away from his death. They have themselves jailed him and the Snow mountain people are trying to get the confession from him day and night. They are thinking about chivalry and hero's face by actually not paying attention to fact that their own son is life is in danger. Such parents are really unusual in this world." As she spoke these words her face filled with disdain towards them.

Shi Potian listens to her but didn't understood what she was trying to say, he asked in a low voice: "What do we do now?"

Dingdang said: "You have to ignite that sedative incense you brought with you in their window and wait till the husband and wife are in stupor. Then push that window and enter in to the room. In pushes the window to enter where Shi Zhong Yu is staying.

You have to do it extremely quietly. Your lightness martial art is good and I don't think master Bai will be able to detect you. My lightness martial arts are inadequate and in fact inferior to you."

Shi Potian nodded and said: "That is not actually that difficult. Chen Xiangzhu

told me that they have captured the Snow mountain disciple using this sedative incense only?"

Dingdang nodded and said with a smile: "This is the lowly weapon of you honorable sect but it is very effectively, otherwise the snow mountain sect disciples are not common people, how can they be so easily captured?"

She also said: "You must be careful and cannot make any sound. You can't compare the Snow mountain sect people with the Shi couple."

Shi Potian complied, he ignited the sedative incense. Although they were in a spacious open place, only after smells a haze, he felt dizziness. He was slightly startled, he asked: "Will this suffocate the people"

Dingdang said: "They used this sedative incense to apprehend the snow mountain disciples earlier; I don't think anyone got suffocated at that time or not."

Shi Potian said: "That does a not sound good but we have to do it anyway. Good, you wait for me here." He arrives around the wall, took the light leap over the wall and entered without making any sound, he found the east wing and went to the second room's window and cocks his ear to hear if he had attracted any of them .He heard no voice and assumed that they all are sleeping soundly so he stuck out his tongue to lick the paper on window and put the ignited end of sedative incense in side that hole.

He waited for some time for the toxic smoke to take affect and moved only after the entire stick got burned. He listened attentively to for any sounds of people. He put a little internal energy to push open the window, the window buckled then broke open immediately, he moved inside the room. There was little light filtering in to the room from the courtyard, he saw the Shi Qing and Min Rou resting on one side and Shi ZhongYu on the other side, all three people are lying motionless.

He took two steps and gain felt dizziness, he understood that he might have inhaled some of the toxic gas. He knew that he can't make any noise so he quickly grabbed Shi Zhong Yu and leapt lightly from the window outside and turned towards the wall where Dingdang was hiding.

Dingdang said in a low voice: "Good, Elder brother, you are really competent."

She also said: "We should move away from here so that we do not alarm Master Bai."

Shi Potian moved away from the wall in the opposite direction and found a hiding place.

Dingdang said: "Elder brother, now quickly take off your clothes and, exchanged with him. Shi Potian took out a small pouch from his waist. It had the bronze medals he received from the envoys of Command of reward punishment and asked: "Thisshould I give him this too?"

Dingdang said: "yes, give him! If someone see this with you this then they will immediately recognize you. I will go and act as lookout...in the meantime change the cloths."

Shi Potian saw her walk away then stripped away his cloths and then exchanged the cloths with Shi Zhong Yu. Once he was done, he went to Dingdang and said: "Ok, done!"

Dingdang turned towards her and said: "Elder brother, the Shi couple care about you a lot and now its responsibility to care about their life. Please be careful."

Shi Potian said: "Yes, I will be careful."

Dingdang loosened a water bag from her waist and poured some water on the face of Shi Zhong Yu to wake him up. After that she took out a small iron box from her bosom, uncovered the lid and put out her hand to take out some kind of greasy herb and said to Shi Potian: "Show me your throat!"

She spread that herb on his throat and said: "Elder brother, it is a medicinal ointment and will make your throat swell. Tomorrow you might have some pain."

Shi Potian said: "It is not important!" He only saw Shi Zhong Yu stirring and coming back to his senses so he said to Dingdang: "II should go."

Dingdang said: "yes, leave quickly!"

Shi Potian took moved towards the room, goes out several ten feet and turned his head to see back. He saw that Shi Zhong Yu was now awake and was talking to Dingdang in low voice. Dingdang smiled as she heard him although the sound

was light but it actually was filled with some illicit meaning.

Shi Potian felt really bad and thought in his heart: "From now on, I cannot be with Dingdang again."

He slightly hesitated and then leapt forward in to that room immediately and pushed the window to enter the room. In that room there was still the some odor of sedated incense so he moved quickly to open the window and let some fresh air in the room.

He only heard the sound of the distant hoof beats and thought that Dingdang and Shi Zhong Yu are leaving now.

He thought in his heart: "Where will they go now? Will Dingdang be happy with him? I am so awkward in front of her and can't even speak properly and anyway she is frequently annoyed and angry with me."

He stood at the window for a long time; there was a gradual painful in his throat so he moved to his bed and lied down immediately.

The ointment Dingdang put on his throat was really effective and by dawn Shi Potian had severe pain in his throat. He put out his hand to trace the pain and felt that a large lump on his throat and he felt a burning sensation. He thought that it might be time that someone will wake up so he is scratched his throat to clean up that ointment and then reversed the cover of the quilt so that no one can see any trace of that ointment.

After some time he groaned as taught by Dingdang, he thought that this is actually a good strategy. Once they will wake up then will pay attention towards his sore throat and even if they feel dizziness than their attention will be diverted to his pain and probably won't investigate.

He groaned for some time, Shi Qing woke up and asked: "What's wrong?" His voice was filled with irritation and anger. Min Rou stood up from bed and said: "Yu'er, are you feeling uncomfortable?"

She did not wait for Shi Potian to reply, then throws on her outer robe and went to him. She touched him and saw that his cheeks were hot as him in fire, his neck has neck swelled up, and she cannot help to restrain her and called out immediately: "Elder brother, Elder brother, youhave a look!"

Shi Qing heard his wife crying and his heart filled with anxiousness, he jumped immediately and moved towards his son. He saw that his neck was totally inflamed and felt really uncomfortable in his heart, he said: "This is what happens when you live such an extravagant life, now be ready to face the consequences."

Min Rou asked: "Is it painful?"

Shi Potian groaned several times but did not dare to open the mouth to speak, he thought: "I have to disguise carefully and can't speak at all or they will recognize me. These people care a lot about Shi Zhong Yu, although he has made many misdemeanors, they still love him, ahhh....but actually there is no one who loves me." His heart filled with bitter memories and he couldn't restrain his tears.

Shi Qing, Min Rou saw him tears and thought that it's really painful so they too got concerned. Shi Qing said: "I will find a doctor to take a look."

Min Rou said: "I am afraid you won't find a doctor in this small town. Why don't we return to Zhenjiang and ask Physician Bei to take a look, what do you say?"

Shi Qing shook his head and said: "No! No we can't do that. Bai Wanjian will get suspicious and will think that we are trying to avoid going to Liao Xing city and secondly I don't think Bei Haishi will be inexpensive." He knew that Bei Haishi was very discontented with his son, perhaps will seize this opportunity to apply some drugs and even might injure him. He moved outside immediately.

Min Rou brought a bowl of hot soup and gave to Shi Potian to drink. This toxicant property of that ointment was really fierce. Once Dingdang applied that to his throat, his pharynx and larynx both swelled up from inside and outside. Shi Potian found it pretty difficult to even drink the soup. Min Rou was really startled.

Soon Shi Qing came back with an old Physician. That doctor had a look at his throat and then took his hand and checked his nerves, he shook his head continually and said: "His pharynx and larynx are really swelled up; it will be really difficult for him to eat or drink. It will be difficult to even give him the medicines. There is some kind of toxic elements in his blood. After that the old Physician

started incessantly babbling about this nerve and that artery and so and so...

Shi Qing got irritated and said: "So tell me first, is my son going to live or there is some danger to his life."

That physician replied: "This brother has good luck that I am present in this small town at this moment of time, since I have examined him, his life is now safe but still it will be several days before he will recover fully and it won't be easy."

Shi Qing, Min Rou heard that his life was not in danger and felt relieved and asked that old person to prescribe the medicine. That doctor hesitated for a long time then opened a book of medicine and afterwards wrote a prescription of several herbs.

Shi Qing roughly understood the property of these herbs and knew that all these herbs were used in cleanse the toxicity from blood.

He said to that old physician: "Wise, really excellent!" he then paid him some money and went to a medicine shop to buy the herbs.

When Bai Wanjian heard that Shi Zhong Yu was ill and a physician came to visit him then he got suspicious. He suspected that Shi couple are planning to rescue their son so she visited their room to check if they are telling truth or not.

He saw that indeed this boy's throat has really swelled up. Min Rou was really frightened and obviously this condition can't be faked. Bai Wanjian actually felt self-satisfied in his heart and thought: "We are anyway taking this cunning boy to the Liao Xing city where he will put to death but you are actually suffering on this journey too...This definitely is divine intervention." But as he looked at the Shi couple and their plight then he felt ashamed to that he is taking pleasure in others' misfortunes. He looked at them again and then withdrew quickly out of the room.

Shi Qing said to his wife who was preparing medicines for Shi Potian: "I have harnessed a large cart outside. Yu'er can travel in it until he is healthy again but this slight illness should not delay others important matters. We should move."

Min Rou hesitated and said: "Child is very ill and you want to start off immediately, I only fear.....his illness will get more critical."

Shi Qing said: "The two envoys of Command of reward and punishment have

said that they are going to the Liao Xing city to invite old Master Bai so his apprentices must rush promptly so they are there when 'Gentleman of Impressive Strength and Virtue' Bai Zizai will get rid of those two and can help one another. If we slow them down than it will be unfair to others."

Min Rou nods saying: "Yes!"

She helped Shi Potian to put on the clothing immediately and held him to go out of the inn.

She understood that plan of her husband that he was not willing sneak off their son secretly. He knew that the envoys of Island of heroes will deliver the invitation to Snow mountain sect. This person Bai Zizai is a very hot tempered, arrogant and egoistic. He will not receive the bronze medals easily and will fight inevitably with Zhang San and Li Si.

Shi Qing wanted to rush promptly to Ling Xiao city and help the snow mountain sect to defeat those people. If he dies in battle than it is a routine for a person for in martial arts realm but if the three people from Shi family loses their life in defense of Snow mountain sect than at least they won't suffer the infamy of their son but if they win unexpectedly, then also the snow mountain sect will be indebted to the Xuan Su manor and won't hurt their son who has just helped them to fight the evil.

Min Rou has already seen these tow envoys in the hall of clan of eternal happiness. She knew that the martial art skills of Zhang San and Li Si are really extraordinary and so is their reputation. However how high is the martial art skill there is always a chance that someone will always make negligence and will make a mistake. If everyone is prepared to take this opportunity then who knows what might happen. Both of them traveled in the martial art realm together and she never opposed his will.

Shi Qing wanted to deliver their child to the Ling Xiao city so Min Rou could easily understand his thoughts even though she was not fully sure as this as this matter have direct implications on her son's life but eventually she was a lady in the martial art world so she pondered over her husband's idea but didn't opposed it.

Bai Wanjian saw that the Shi couple are not waiting for their son to recover

and are ready to travel despite his serious illness and really admired them from his heart.

In that small town, that physician gave Shi Potian medicines but inflammation in his throat didn't come down much. The Shi couple were more concerned about his health and never suspected that he was not Shi Zhong Yu but is actually Shi Potian. Bai Wanjian and his fellow disciples never even gave a look towards him so naturally they didn't know.

The facial expression of Shi Potian and Shi Zhong Yu was anyway similar and when he wore the magnificent clothing and personal adornments of Shi Zhong Yu, it was pretty difficult to distinguish. On top of that Shi Potian didn't utter a single word and simply lied down in the large cart. There was indeed difference in the way they do things or manners but the Shi couple have not themselves met their son for years and didn't knew much about his habits.

Some of the people from the group went ahead for the fear that Zhang San and Li Si are already ahead and they might be late to reach the Ling Xiao city so they did not dare get delayed on the road. By the time they reached Hunan, the swelling on the throat of Shi Potian has totally disappeared and he has abandoned the carriage and started riding the horse but he still was not speaking at all. Shi Qing took him to several doctors along the road but no one has a least bit clue and every one gave a different prognosis. Min Rou was really sad and several times she broke and started weeping incessantly.

After many days they arrived in western region. The snow mountain disciples were familiar with the way and the alleys in the mountains. They expected that Zhang San and Li Si might be quick but they don't have much knowledge about this area and it will take some time so they will be able to catch up them inevitably. On the other hand Shi Qing and Min Rou were worried that if they reach too early before the two envoys reach there. It's possible that old master Bai might get angry once he sees Yu'er and kill him immediately.

They also thought that Zhang San and Li Si are really good and they also might arrive before they reach Ling Xiao city. It was an extremely difficult situation; they can't arrive to that place too early and neither too late. The couple discussed in secret several times but obviously they couldn't do anything about it. They left the entire situation to one's fate with resignation and agreed to take

action as the opportunity is seen.

As the destination came close numerous people went upward, they were walking on the mountain ridge and the topography was getting higher and higher. That day in the afternoon, they saw several rows of big wooden cabins. Bai Wanjian inquired the guards about the situation in Ling Xiao city. The person guarding the carriages said that there were no new incidents that he knew of. They felt greatly relieved. In the evening all of them slept in those log cabin, next day early in the morning, they left their horses there only and climbed the mountain on foot. The mountain was really steep from that point onwards and it wasn't possible to ride a horse. Several snow mountain disciples moved ahead and led them.

Shi Potian followed his parents but didn't move ahead of them. Shi Qing and Min Rou saw him not tired at all and thought: "This child internal energy is good, in fact it's comparable to us." As they thought about this they also thought about their impending meeting with old master Bai and couldn't help but to get concerned.

By evening, they saw only a single mountain peak is shooting up to the sky and on the top there were several hundred building visible from this place.

Bai Wanjian said: "Master Shi, this is Ling Xiao city, Out-of-the-way place, actually a poor township."

Shi Qing said: "It is majestically located and overlooking the hills, 'Ling Xiao' (meaning: soaring to the clouds) these two characters are really worthy of the reputation." He saw with his own eyes that a foggy cloudy rose and gradually covered the entire city. When numerous people reached at the foot of the hill, it was already dark. They were carrying lodging on their back and decided to spend their night there only. Everyone was full in spirit as they prepared the bed and spent the night.

On the next morning, several people moved at the dawn only and started the journey. This part of the mountain was the steepest of all. Although these numerous people were martial art expert but still they have to actually wait twice to rest and eat as they reached halfway up the mountainside pavilion.

The sign of the Ling Xiao city was erected on gate and they saw the city wall

about thirty feet high. The top of the wall was completely covered with snow and ice.

Shi Qing said: "master Bai, the top of the city wall is covered with snow and ice so it will really difficult for an outsider to get inside the city wall using iron hooks. It's really impossible for even an army."

Bai Wanjian said with a smile: "The founding fathers constructed this city to open the sect here about One hundred and seventy years ago. Actually no foreign enemy has attacked this place but in deep winter sometimes the common greedy person might make a sneak attack, then again he can't enter the city." Here, to protect the city, there is an ice ditch and a hanging bridge is hoisted high and it's not laid down.

They heard an angry voice shouting loudly: "Who is turning up today? Who wants to come in?"

Someone replied: "Master Bai Wanjian and numerous other brothers from the sect are coming back."

Bai Wanjian shouted: "Manor Master Shi Qing and Lady Min Rou are visiting too, lay down the hanging bridge quickly."

That person said: "Yes, yes!" But even after a long time, they did not see that the hanging bridge getting down.

Shi Qing saw that ice ditch and though that it is at least thirty feet wide and such a distance is obviously not that was easy to leap. Outside the common city wall has the moat, here climate is severely cold, in the moat the river water has formed the ice, but this ditch was dug really deep, nearby the ditch there were piece of ice in the wall, no matter a person or beast, if it falls then there is no way he can come out.

Geng Wanzhong, Wanjun and others shouted out repeatedly for the disciples who were defending the city to quickly open the door. Bai Wanjian saw that the situation is quite unusual and got worried that something might have happened in the city. He said in a low voice: "Numerous fellow-disciples are worried that those two have already arrived in the city." As soon as he said these words they heard a loud sound and people got startled and cannot help but put out a hand to their sword hilt.

This was actually the rolling sound of the bridge and they saw that the hanging bridge coming down slowly. They saw a person coming out from the city, wearing a long white gown, the right sleeve tied up in his waistband; obviously this person was missing his right arm.

That person called out: "Manor-master Shi Qing and Lady Min Rou have arrived, infrequent visitors, infrequent visitors!"

That person was "Wind and fire dragon" Feng Wanli. He came himself to greet the Shi couple personally. Shi Qing saw him without his arm and thought that he has lost his arm because of the deeds of his son and felt really bad in his heart. He moved ahead and said: "Brother Feng, we husband and wife are accompanied with my disobedient son who has committed crime against old master Bai and you."

As he said these words he kneeled down and prostrated in front of him. He was a famous master in the martial art realm and since becoming famous, except when seeing elders and superiors he might have prostrated but never to a person of the same generation but Feng Wanli has lost his arm because of his son so he was really ashamed. Feng Wanli was also a famous master and was studying martial arts for more than twenty years but he has lost his right arm for one mistake of his disciple.

Min Rou saw her husband kneeling in front of Feng Wanli but her son was still standing in front of his teacher and was busy on his front piece, she too knelt down to pay her respect.

Shi Qing said: "Yu'er, he is your master, kowtow immediately!" Shi Potian was afraid that they might see through his deception so he looked towards Feng Wanli and immediately knelt down with a thumping sound.

The snow mountain sect disciples paid no attention to him all the way, at this moment when he kowtowed in front of Feng Wanli then they thought: "This boy now knows that his life is short so now he is kowtowing to beg for mercy but redemption might not be so easy."

Feng Wanli actually said: "Master Shi, Madam Shi, Please don't embarrass me." and he too knelt down hurriedly to give them face.

After the Shi couple and Feng Wanli stood up, Shi Potian was still kneeling in

front of them. Feng Wanli looked at him and said to Shi Qing: "Brother Shi, Madam Shi, we met at Mount Hengshan in the past, we are meeting again after about twelve years but you two still look as elegant as in the past. Although little brother is living in this out-of-the-way place in border region, still I know that you virtuous husband and wife are upholding justice in the martial arts realm and your reputation is getting bigger and bigger, we should celebrate your success."

Shi Qing said: "My son has had been part of many improper conducts and have some unwarranted reputations. Today I see my worthy brother in this condition and I am seriously ashamed and feel have no face left in the martial art realm."

Feng Wanli laughed and said: "Our generation is in the junction of morality and justice; we are indebted to you that you have not abandoned the path of righteousness. I offend you and then you offend me, how can be this good but we will concern about this matter later. You two have completed a very long and arduous journey, please come in the city and rest quickly." Although Shi Potian knelt in front of them but Feng Wanli didn't give any attention towards him.

Shi Qing and Feng Wanli entered the city immediately shoulder to shoulder. Min Rou looked towards Feng Wanli. She saw that even though he was speaking politely to them but from his face his hatred for their son was obvious and it was clear that he is not willing to forgive their son's mistakes.

Bai Wanjian stood in the back and then asked a disciple who was standing at the city gate in a low voice: "Is old Master Bai fine? After we left the city, what happened in the city?"

That disciple said: "Old Master.....isis recently more hot-tempered. After you people left from the city, there was no accident as such....only ...only...."

Bai Wanjian got worried and asked: "tell me what happened?"

That disciple got frightened and said: "Five days ago, the old master got really angry and killed the elder brothers from Lu and Su clan."

Bai Wanjian was startled, he asked quickly: "Why?"

That disciple said: "Disciple does not know the circumstances of the matter. Day before yesterday the old master also killed a elder brother from Yan clan and also cut the thigh of a fellow disciple from Du clan."

Bai Wanjian got really frightened and his heart started jumping madly. He thought in his heart: "Lu, Su, Yan and Du , these four clans were the founding members of the Snow mountain sect, father usually regarded them pretty high so why did he resorted to such violent methods?"

He quickly pulled that disciple to one side and waited for Min Rou and Shi Potian to walk afar and asked: "For what matter?"

That disciple said: "Disciple does not know the circumstances. Old master has killed the fellow disciples and everyone is flustered. Yesterday, younger brother Zhang and Ma did not keep the books and letters properly and old master was extremely angry and tried to kill him. It was only after elder brother Feng intervened that they managed to save their life. I hope that now you people have returned, you will urge the old gentleman to"

Bai Wanjian also asked several questions and then walked towards the hall immediately, he saw Feng Wanli accompanying the Shi couple and having teas. He said: "You two please sit here at ease. Younger brother will accompany you in a moment, I will go and pay a visit to my family and ask them to come out to see the guest."

Feng Wanli knits his brows and said: "Old Master is suffering from some illness and is resting from yesterday only. We are afraid that it might be some time before he will be able to see the guest. Otherwise he would have come out himself to pay respect to the brother Shi."

Bai Wanjian was utterly confused and said: "Let me have a look."

He anxiously entered the hall, arrived at his father's bedroom and stood near door, coughs and said: "Father, the child has come back."

The curtain raises, a beautiful woman comes out. She was concubine of master Bai.

Bai Wanjian waits for his mother. She was looking really pale and thin, she said: "Thank God, eldest son has come back; we were having a really bad time but it looks now that things will improve. Old Master Bai got ill sometimes back. A lot of physicians and priests have some and looked at him but still there is no progress. II seek help from gods and Buddha buteldest son, youyou" She sobbed as she spoke and then started crying.

Bai Wanjian said: "What has happened to father actually?"

Her mother cried and said: "We don't know. If disciples speak incorrect words, then old Master Bai is simply filled with rage and has already killed several disciples continually. The old master have went mad and is shaking all over; he is having cramps and salivating from his mouth. He is not saying any words as him a stroke have hit him. Some people said it is a stroke but I did not know...." she kept on sobbing as she told these words.

Bai Wanjian heard "stroke" these two characters and felt as if his whole body is just plunged in to ice water. He didn't say anything to his mother and yelled: "Father!" He moved to the bedroom. Before seeing his father he saw his brocade hanging down, in the room there was an earthen jar of medicine and he was sitting in front of boiling medicines and braving the steam.

Bai Wanjian went closer to curtain and called: "Father!" he put out a hand to open the curtain, he saw his father sitting motionless, unexpectedly he saw not movement and got worried. He put out his hand and with great surprise saw the heart beating and felt relived.

As he extended to his hand towards his mouth, in his bedding, he heard a clattering sound and saw a bunch of metallic pins unexpectedly. Bai Wanjian calls out in alarm: "Father, it is me; your son has come back." Suddenly two fingers struck his chest and belly simultaneously and he couldn't move.

Shi Qing and Min Rou sat in the hall and drank tea, Feng Wanli accompanied them, and Shi Potian sat beside his father and was pretty relaxed as Feng Wanli and Shi Qing talked about the matters of central plan and didn't mention anything about Shi Zhong Yu.

Shi Qing thought that everyone in the vicinity and in Ling Xiao city is looking quite tense and its looks as if they are trying to conceal their concerns. Actually he wasn't too surprised. He thought: "They knew that the envoys of island of heroes will be arriving soon and it will be a big moment for the Snow mountain sect and it could be matter of life or death, honor or disgrace. Everybody was bound by a common cause so obviously everyone was so heavyhearted."

Even after a long time, they did not see Bai Wanjian coming out.

Feng Wanli said: "old master Bai is seriously ill. He is their eldest son and is

coming after some time; it looks elder brother Bai Wanjian is serving old master with Chinese medicines. The internal energy of old master is really deep, he is always healthy, in last the several years, I can't even remember that he has even caught cold but this illness is really sudden and unexpected. It is really fierce too. We hope that he convalesce quickly."

Shi Qing said: "The internal energy level of old master Bai is truly rare, even in his old age he will be able to recuperate easily. My worthy brother cannot be so worried." In his heart actually he cannot help but secretly rejoices and thought: "If Bai Zizai is really sick then he won't handle the matter of my son immediately, if heaven pities me then Zhang San and Li Si will arrive and then we will see how to handle the matter."

After some time the weather gradually turned black, Feng Wanli assigns some people to arrange the banquet and also gave Shi Potian a seat. Except these four people they also some of the other Snow mountain sect disciples. Geng Wanzhong, Wanjun and others disciples who came with them didn't make an appearance. The atmosphere was really light as they talked and argued about different matters. Lian Shibo poured wine and urged them to drink one after another.

Min Rou has already drunk three cups, she said: "This wine is really potent."

That disciple said: "Madame Shi does not know that the topography of this place. The climate is extremely cold, moreover there is always fogs and wind blowing around, the moisture is high too, although you two have really high internal strength and the cold air won't be harmful to you but still drinking this Yang Yujiu wine will benefit the body greatly. In the Ling Xiao city, this wine is actually an indispensable thing." He said these words as he poured more wine.

Min Rou thought: "He said politely that our internal strength is deep and we do not fear the cold winds but if we don't drink this wine then it might be difficult to survive in these conditions. It looks like some kind of a medicated wine." So she took two more cups and drank them immediately. Suddenly she saw that these people were not drinking any wine and she felt a severe pain in her lower abdomens and felt a burning sensation in her chest, she repressed the pain and said with a smile: "Feng my worthy brother, thisThis wine is quite fierce!"

Shi Qing actually suddenly stood up and shouted: "What wine is this?"

Feng Wanli said with a smile: "This Yang Yujiu wine is really fierce, I am afraid the famous masters of Xuan Su Manor are not able to handle it."

Shi Qing said fiercely: "YouYou" suddenly his body twitched and he fell on the table top. Min Rou tried to help him to hold but she too was feeling dizziness and unexpectedly both people simultaneously fell unconscious.

Shi Potian slowly came back to consciousness... still he didn't understand where he was for a moment. He puts out a hand to support the body and sit up, suddenly realized that both his hands are tied with some ice-cold hard thing. He was startled in his heart and sobered immediately. He actually felt frightened to find his hands and legs both shackled and waking up in damp dark place. He did not know where he was. He stood up immediately and tried to explore but only after two steps his head struck something and he fell to the ground.

He calm down a bit and put out his hands to touch slowly all around, he detected that he is kept in some kind of a stone chamber about ten feet wide, its floor was uneven and looked like it was underground and really old. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness he observed that there was a small glimmer of light at the left corner, as he looked closely, he found that it was a small hole about a foot wide and rats or other small animals might be using them for passage but they are not able to make it any wider.

He raised his arms and struck that part of the cliff, a loud sound exudes all around but still the cliff was firm and thick and he understood that it's pretty hard to break.

He sat along the wall and thought: "How did I come here? These people only served us that Yang Yujiu wine, it really was a strange drink after drinking that I remember Manor Master Shi Qing and Lady Min Rou fainting and then falling down in the banquet.

It seems that the snow mountain people wants to kill Shi Zhong Yu in any case but they feared that the Shi couple might resist so they have given us this toxic drink However they haven't kill me yet, why? Is it because the Old hero Bai is really sick and they have imprisoned me first so they can decide my fate once he has recovered and will personally deal with me?"

He also thought: "When old Hero Bai will ask, I only have to explain that I am Gouzazhong and not Shi Zhong Yu. We might have some resentment but after all we don't have any enmity so after verifying the truth they will leave me but they might not actually leave the Shi couple. They might keep them in jail and wait until Shi Zhong Yu voluntarily surrenders to them. Madam Shi is such a refined person, how can she survive in such a stone chamber with no daylight. She might go mad after some time. I have to think of a way to rescue her and Manor master Shi Qing.

He thought about saving them but immediately thought about his own situation and thought: "I am myself handcuffed and shackled, I need someone else to save me now, how can I save others? In this Ling Xiao city, each person is from the Snow mountain sect, who will save me?"

Both of his arms were kind of joined and shackled, he tried to separate both his arm and exerted a lot of energy but he was shackled with iron chains and he was not able to even move them by a jot.

After some time he saw a light shooting up from that pinhole as suddenly some people came outside with lamps. They moved across and then moved a tile and put an earthen bowl of food. It had enough quantity of rice, on rice there were several brined vegetables and bamboo chopsticks were inserted in the rice. Shi Potian did not pretend to be mute again and called out: "Hello, hello, I had the words to say to the old Master Bai!"

Outside that person sneered at him and then closed the tile and the light gradually receded and unexpectedly that person walked away without saying a single word.

Shi Potian smelled the food and found its fragrance really inviting, he thought: "I feel really hungry however I have had so much food in the banquet, how can I be that hungry? It looks I was unconscious for a long period of time." He held the earthen bowl and started eating the rice and the brined vegetable.

After finishing eating the food, he kept the earthen bowl to its original position and again made an effort to free himself of the chains but after struggling for several times, he detected that the shackles on his hand and foot are made of really fine quality of iron and although he used his internal energy he wasn't able

to twist it instead his ankle got rashes by continual abrasion the skin; He tried to find out the gateway again, he tried to push the door by his shoulder but didn't manage to budge it. After some time he got disappointed and thought: "If only I could have managed to escape then I might found the Shi couple and rescue them."

He didn't manage to think of anyway so simply laid against the cliff, closed his eyes and slept. In the stone jail, he did not know the time and waited for almost entire day, some person come to deliver the food, he only saw a hand extended from the hole, to take the bowl and replace it with another one.

Suddenly an idea flashed in his mind and Shi Potian waited for that person put his hand to take the earthen bowl and as soon as that person put his hand in, he grabbed his hand. His shackles made a lot of sound but still Shi Potian get hold of that person's right wrist. He applied his internal energy to control that person; obviously that person couldn't withstand his internal energy and started to squeal like a pig as he felt immense pain in his hand.

Shi Potian relaxed a bit, pulled his arm closer to take a clear look and said in a loud voice: "If you yell again than I will wrench apart your arm!"

That person entreated: "I won't yell, youjust leave my arm."

Shi Potian said: "fine then, open the door quickly and let me out."

That person said: "Fine, you let me go, I will open the door."

Shi Potian said: "If I leave your arm then you will run away...I cannot do that."

That person said: "if you won't leave me than how can I open the door?"

Shi Potian thought that his words are correct but if I leave his hand then he will anyway run away but if I won't leave him then he can't open the door, it is a great difficulty. He suddenly got another idea and said: "Throws my handcuff's key."

That person said: "Key? That.....that is not at my side, I am just a person who only cooks and delivers the food."

Shi Potian listened to his voice and felt that this person is not sincere so tightened his fingers and said: "Good, than let me first wrenched apart your

hand."

That person called out in extreme pain: "Oh, oh....." This tactics finally worked as that person threw the key from the hole. This person was really sly, he threw the key but it landed far from his place. If Shi Potian has to get those keys then he had to leave this person's hand.

Shi Potian was again struck in a difficult situation but he didn't relinquish that person's hand. He pulled that persons hand and extended his left leg to get hold of the key ring. Although he tried to extend himself fully and pulled that person's hand from the hole with a lot of strength, still his foot fell short of by few feet from the key ring.

That person was in terrible pain and he called out: "If you will pull me again with such force than you will definitely take my arm with you.

Shi Potian extended his leg with every effort, but both his hand and feet were shackled so he was not able to stretch his body properly and didn't manage to get the key ring. He looked at that feet which were extending, suddenly got another idea. He bent his left leg to take off the shoe and aimed at the wall. It hit the wall and came back and hit the key ring and moved it towards him. Shi Potian cheered and retrieved the key ring to free himself from the shackles.

He first opened the handcuffs from his left hand and then his right hand and also never left the hand of that person. Once Shi Potian had freed himself from the handcuff; that person that asked: "YouWhat will you do now?"

Shi Potian said with a smile: "You may open the door." He put out the handcuffs from the hole. That person still hesitated; Shi Potian holds the handcuffs and pulled his arm to handcuff that person and asked him to open the door. That person tried to pull and applied a lot of strength but he immediately started bleeding from his nose. That person now knew for sure that he can't resist so he towed along with the chains and opened the door but his shackle's another end was above the foot shackles of Shi Potian. Although the doors of the room were open but the shackle through the pinhole still tied these two people, Shi Potian has not still been able to come out.

Shi Potian pulled the shackles and said: "Give me the key for these leg shackles too."

That person looked really distressed and said: "I do not have one. I only sweep the floor and cook meal; I don't have keys for them."

Shi Potian said: "Good, wait for me to ask you again." He pulls in that person's arm from hole and unlocked the handcuff.

That person saw that he is free now so he tried to move away from the door and run away hurriedly. Shi Potian however quickly moved to intercept him and held again the wall. Once he came out then only he saw that this person was wearing a white gown, from his appearance he looked like a disciple of a Snow mountain sect, not someone who sweeps the floor and cooks. He held him by his collar and said in a loud voice: "If you do not open my shackles then I will hit your head on this stone wall again and again." As he said these words he gently hits his head on the stone wall. The martial art of that person was not weak but as soon as he fell in the hand of Shi Potian, he resembled like the prey in the claws of an eagle and unexpectedly he took out the keys and opened his shackles within half a minute.

Shi Potian asked that person: "Where Manor Master Shi Qing and his wife Min Rou are held? Lead me to that place quickly."

That person said: "Snow mountain sect and the Xuan Su manor have no resentment or enmity. We have already let them go and haven't imprisoned them."

Shi Potian was half believing and half doubting but he didn't trust that person at all and thought: "This person has decided to lie again and again; it's more likely that they have imprisoned Shi couple here only." He led that person towards the next room quickly and ordered: "Quick open the door."

That person's complexion changed and she said: "II do not have the key. Inside this room, there is no person but actually is a lion, don't open this door, I am really serious."

Shi Potian heard this person talking about Lion and was greatly surprised. He put his ears to the door and heard so sound at all. That person said: "You, since you have come out, quickly run away, what you are waiting for...if you are detected then they will catch you again and put in prison..."

Shi Potian thought: "You are not my friend, why do you care for me? Initially

when I wanted you to open the handcuff and door, you were not willing, at this moment you are actually urging me to run away quickly. I think the Shi couple are held in this room only."

He spoke to that person: "Can't open? I must take a look at lion."

That person was shocked and he said: "The lion locked here is very fierce and haven't eaten for several days. If he sees a human then will immediately attack us....."

Shi Potian heard him for some time and was getting really impatient with his random stories so he lifted that person and inverted him in the air, caught his foot and started swinging him like a yo-yo. Suddenly two more keys fell from his body. Shi Potian felt really happy, he took the keys and inserted it in the lock and turned and the lock opened. That person turned and started to run away.

Shi Potian thought: "If he runs away then he might disclose his whereabouts and it will be inconvenient." So he snatched that person again and imprisoned him in his own stone chamber and threw his shackles in that room too.

He came back to that room and called out: "Master Shi, Madame Shi, are you here?"

He called out again but heard no sound. Shi Potian moved away from that room and thought I still have one more key, let me see where the other room is?

He looked for the other room and opened it with his keys and opened the door several inches, called one "Master Shi" He heard someone shouting abuse towards him: "Son of a Turtle, you bastard, the turtle bastard, I will shear in to thousand pieces, I will kill you like a dog"

Shi Potian heard the sound of shackles as that person moved closer to him. This person scolded with an impressive voice, his throat was hoarse and his accent was entirely different with Shi Potian and other people from central plains.

Shi Potian thought: "Although Master Shi Qing and his wife are not here but this person also looks like an enemy to the Snow mountain people, he might help me to save the Shi couple."

He said: "You did not need to scold; I am here to save you."

That person continues to scold: "What thing are you? You dare to talk nonsense and trying to deceive me? II will wrench your neck"

Shi Potian showed a faint smile and thought in his heart: "This person has really a foul temper. He is imprisoned in this dark stone jail for a long time, no wonder he is angry." He moved sideways immediately and said: "Did you also have shackles on your foot?" Just as he asked these words, suddenly he heard a loud voice that person shot towards his head.

Shi Potian moved sideways toward left, avoided this move but his foothold was not steady and he slipped and that person grabbed his body, his hands clutching the pharynx and larynx and trying to squeeze them. This person was a man of extraordinary strength and immediately Shi Potian found it pretty difficult to breathe and he heard a faint buzzing sound in his ear "turtle son bastard" and other verbal abuses.

Shi Potian had good intentions and he wanted to save that person's life but he never expected that opposite party will unexpectedly try to injure him. On top of that he has met a fierce master in this dark prison. He has already lost the initiative, he shouted: "This is not good!"

He had no other alternative as that person was applying more pressure on his throat. Although the throat muscles are soft and don't match his arm's strength but his internal energy was immense and he directed that towards his throat vigorously. It hit the person unexpectedly in several points in his hand and he immediately left his throat. Shi Potian breathed heavily for a moment and got ready for his next attack. He called out: "I want to save you and you are playing rough with me?"

That person was really astonished and said: "YouWho are you? Your internal energy is not weak." He stared at Shi Potian for some time and then again shouted loudly: "young fellow, who are you?"

Shi Potian said: "II" he did not want to tell him that he is called Gouzazhong but also didn't want to pretend as Shi Zhong Yu now.

That person got angry: "You naturally are you, Are you not surnamed?"

Shi Potian said: "I have saved you, first tell me who are you?"

That person sneered and said: "Do you save me? Heh heh, how could it be.....and you are asking me, who am I? What thing are you? Depending on your little three legged cat's trick, you think that you can save me?"

By this time both the doors were half opened and sunlight filtered in. he saw that the person standing in front of him had a full gray beard on his face, he was tall and powerfully built, his back a little bent and it looked as if this stone chamber was not able to contain his big body, his eyes had a twinkling brilliance like a lightning and this person exudes an overwhelming aura around himself.

Shi Potian saw him looking at him and got scared in his heart, he thought: "That snow mountain disciple said just now that there was a lion imprisoned here, the appearance of this person is actually a bit like a beast."

He didn't dare to say anything but still babbled: "I will look for the key and will free you from those shackle and handcuffs."

That person got angry, he said: "Who wants you to flatter me? I will remain here voluntarily otherwise how will the people close to me live? You young boy has not brought the key but said that you are freeing me... Heh, grandpa nowadays has mellowed down, if not for my good temperament, only after hearing these words; I would have cut you in to 17-18 pieces."

He moved his both hands, swung the shackles and said: "Grandpa has cooled down a lot...actually these shackles are nothing to me. These are just like ordinary pieces of thread in my eyes."

Shi Potian did not believe these words and thought: "This person of personality and voice is impressive but he is behaving like a lunatic. He does not want me to rescue, if I insist to him to open his handcuffs and shackles, then he might hit me. His martial art skills are high, I don't want to fight him, saving the Shi couple is more important right now."

He said: "Since this is what you want so I am leaving."

That person got angry and started abusing again: "Get out of here, your smelly duck egg, grandpa has roamed the entire world up and down and has not met a worthy rival, who want this boy to save me?" And he said other abusing words towards Shi Potian.

Shi Potian thought: "Ohhh...No, it looks that I have again done something wrong." He moved outside of the door and walked along the path.

The path was really long; he made a turn and arrived at a place. Here there was a line of doors on both sides at about every ten feet. He pushed the door on the left side but couldn't even budge it. He then pushed the one on the right and it smoothly opened. After passing through that door, he entered a small hall. He came in to the hall and saw a line of several steps and then heard the sound of several weapons and he judged by the sound that the fighting must be really intense.

Suddenly Shi Potian thought: "It might be the Shi Qing couple fighting with the Snow mountain people. He got scared and hurriedly started to look for door to get to that place.

He tried to look for a passage to reach that place but couldn't find any way to reach that place. He was really concerned about the safety of Shi Qing and Min Rou and each passing second passed like hours for him. He saw that the wooden partitions on the left-hand side are not really thick and he hit it with his shoulder. The board rose steeply and broke. The sound of the weapon was now more abundant. He saw that in that small main hall, four white clothing men were fighting with swords and trying to besiege two females.

Shi Potian saw these two females and could not restrain himself and called out loudly: "Master, A'Xiu!"

That two people were Grandma Shi and A'Xiu.

Grandma Shi held a short-hilted broadsword, A'Xiu brandished a long sword but he saw that these two people were fighting chaotically, everyone was bearing several wounds, the blood had splashed on the clothing and the circumstance were very perilous. Both people heard Shi Potian cry but those four men were attacking really tightly; the swordsmanship was swift and fierce and had no time to turn their head and look towards him. Then he heard A'Xiu calling out in alarm as she was injured on her shoulder by a sword.

Shi Potian didn't think anything and immediately moved towards that middle-aged person who has injured A'Xiu and was pressing her in to submission. Shi Potian suddenly attacked this person out of blue and got him in a single move.

The old man on the left saw him suddenly entering in the fight and attacked him. Shi Potian sent his right hand attack to that old man.

That old man moved his sword point towards his lower abdomen, the sword moved really fast like a flash. Shi Potian has once learnt the sword skills of the Snow Mountain sect from Grandma Shi. The moment that old man executed this move he understood that this move is "in range double plum". This move had actually two steps, the first step was that sword attacks the lower abdomen and then the second step was to attack the legs in a continuous motion.

Shi Potian immediately shrank his lower abdomen and avoided the first attack and at the same time employed the counter move suggested by Grandma Shi. He moved his left hand immediately, extended the middle finger to grab. That old man's second sword came exactly as Shi Potian expected. He extended his fingers to grab the sword and with a zheng sound, the sword broke in to two parts. That old man shook his half-numbed hand and couldn't restrain himself from getting ashamed. He moved back immediately and withdrew from the fight and his complexion changed immediately.

Shi Potian moved to his left hand and found out that one person was still attacking A'Xiu. He attacked that person. That person was already shocked, he withdrew his sword hurriedly, and Shi Potian took advantage of a favorable situation to take control and attacked his chest. That person moved back continually to avoid him but after three steps, he too got hit and sat on the ground.

Shi Potian now moved towards the fourth person. That person was already struggling against Grandma Shi and was somehow fending her and was already got hit several times. Shi Potian hit that person and that person fell on the ground, blood spurting from the mouth and fainted immediately.

All the four men collapse against Shi Potian in a moment and only that old man was not injured. He saw with own eyes that Shi Potian had invincible internal energy and was startled and terror-stricken, he said: "YouYou" he tried to jump and run away suddenly and rushed towards the door.

Grandma Shi called out: "Do not let him go!"

Shi Potian swept his left leg and connected with that person and that person

fell to ground. Both knees of that old man were now shaking with fear as he failed to escape.

Grandma Shi said with a smile: "Good boy, so the senior disciple of my Golden Phoenix sect is back!"

The face of A'Xiu whitened as she was badly wounded on her shoulder wound but her eyes really lit up as she stared at Shi Potian and couldn't shield the unlimited joy she experienced.

Shi Potian said: "Master, A'Xiu, I never thought that I will see you here."

Grandma Shi wrapped the wound on the shoulder of A'Xiu hurriedly; she tore a piece of cloth from the skirt and first tied it around her wound. The injuries of both people were basically superficial sword cuts and were not any serious.

Shi Potian asked: "I could not find you in the Azure mist island; I thought of you every day and night, now after so many days we have met that's really good...but it should have been better if we were not separated."

Grandma Shi smiled and said: "You, if you can accomplish a great merit then I can permit it. Will it be good enough if your Grandma promises verbally?" A'Xiu hung her head low and her ear turned red.

Shi Potian didn't understand that Grandma Shi is actually accepting his marriage proposal with A'Xiu, he asked: "What will master permit?"

Grandma Shi said with a smile: "I will give my granddaughter to you as a wife, will you like that?"

Shi Potian was pleasantly surprised and happily said: "III obviously want, I would like this; actually I will like it very much....."

Grandma Shi said: "But you have to complete this big merit first. The snow mountain sect are vicious bunch, we have to first find a person."

Shi Potian said: "Yes, I too have to find the master of Xuan Su Manor Shi and his wife. We should look quickly." As he thought about the Shi Qing couple, his heart again burnt with impatience.

Grandma Shi said: "Are Shi Qing and his wife also in the Liao Xing city? If they are also captured then it means they are really sloppy. A'Xiu, quickly kill all these

four people first?"

A'Xiu took her sword and moved towards that old man. That old person was relying on the wall and as soon as A'Xiu moved towards him, his face lost all the color and she saw her with begging eyes. A'Xiu felt compassion towards her, Grandma Shi has just she accepted marriage proposal and she was extremely joyful in her heart and didn't have the heart to kill anyone at that moment.

She said: "Grandma, these people are not the chief instigators, they are just lowly people who do as they are said, why don't we await for the trial and will decide later."

Grandma Shi sighed and said: "Fine then walk quickly, follow me, do not delay it's an important matter." She immediately moved outside with A'Xiu and Shi Potian following her.

Grandma Shi walked out of the lobby and moved extremely quickly, whenever she saw a person, she would quietly and quickly hide behind a door or around the corner. She seemed very familiar with each houses, roads and streets.

Shi Potian and A'Xiu walked side-by-side, he asked in a low voice: "What big merit does master want me to do? Who do I have to save?"

A'Xiu was about to answer when she heard the footsteps sound of about five-six people. Grandma Shi is hurriedly hid behind a pillar; A'Xiu pulled Shi Potian by his sleeves and found a hiding place nearby.

They only heard several people talking on the other side of the road. Someone said: "It's good that everybody made a joint effort and managed to seize that old lunatic, now I am relaxed. Earlier I didn't even eat or sleep without worrying. I would rest for a moment and then will wake afraid after a bad dream."

Another person said: "We have not killed that old lunatic, eventually it will be huge trouble in future. Actually elder brother himself was indecisive; I thought that this matter should be finished there and then only."

Another person with a deep and gruff voice said: "Getting rid of one won't do, Elder brother will do something only if he manages to get both of them together."

A person shouted in loud voice: "Keeps silent! How can you talk out these

matters in public? If Liao or Qi hears you fellows than I am afraid then your heads will start rolling on the ground."

The person with gruff voice refused to accept his command and said, said albeit in a lower voice: "Liao and Qi are fighting themselves, I am not certain that they have time for us."

This group of people gradually moved far away, Shi Potian and A'Xiu moved towards the door. Shi Potian looked at A'Xiu and saw her trembling slightly, asked in a low voice: "A'Xiu, are you afraid?"

A'Xiu said: "II am really frightened. There are so many people, how can we fight them all?"

Grandma Shi was standing behind a pillar; she came out and said in a low voice: "Walk quickly." She moved forward quickly. Shi Potian and A'Xiu followed her and passed through the courtyard and then came across the corridor and then arrived in a big garden. In the garden everywhere was snow, however a cobblestone alley was spread around it and lead to a big hall.

Grandma Shi jumped to a tree to avoid the snow and from there jumped outside the hall. She patted the snow from her cloths and moved closer to the hall. As soon as she moved in closer to the hall two people who were patrolling the area saw her and rushed towards her with sword in their hand. Grandma Shi stood rigidly and motionless, let both people come to her and then moved the broadsword. In a single stroke she cut open the throat of both people and they didn't even made a single sound.

Shi Potian was startled by the calmness with which Grandma Shi killed these two people in such a violent way. This move was also taught to him by Grandma Shi, it was called "Red flame in spring" but Shi Potian never thought that if he executes this move then he will be able kill people in such a clean way. He cannot help to restrain his heart from jumping madly.

Grandma Shi quickly hid the two corpses under a bush, doesn't made any sound and arrived at outside of the hall and puts her ear close to the long window and listened attentively to the sounds coming from inside. Shi Potian and A'Xiu approached the window too and started listening. They only heard the voices of two people arguing intensely, although they were not fighting or

shouting in loud voice but both these people looked really angry by their expressions.

They heard one person saying: "Tying up the tiger is easy but to hold him tied up is really difficult, I think you might have heard this proverb. I don't want to sacrifice everybody for this matter. If that old lunatic get freed somehow or manage to escape then everybody will die without their burial ground."

Shi Potian thought: "They all are saying that "old lunatic", is it really possible that this was the same old person I tried to rescue in the prison? That person was really old and strange, I was trying to save him but he was not willing to come out, I am afraid he was really a lunatic, however his martial art was very fierce, no wonder everybody is so frightened of him."

They heard another person saying: "That old lunatic is already imprisoned in that jail, even if he has exceedingly high skills, still he can't run away. We can kill him at this moment, it is really easy, you only don't have to deliver food to him for some days, and he will starve to death in eight to ten days, isn't it? When the people in the martial art realm will know about this that they will criticize and say that this is against righteousness and shameless, you Liao Shidi, I have no doubt that you do not care about them but what about rest of us? Will it not destroy the reputation of the Snow mountain sect in the martial art world?"

That person surnamed Liao sneered at him and said: "You are afraid to go against the old conventions and against the flow of events, what should a leader do at such time? Now this matter has come on head than you are pretending that you don't want to involve yourself in this matter at all. Elder brother Qi, I recognize a hypocrite when I see one."

That person surnamed Qi said: "What exactly are you implying by saying thee words? Liao Shidi, if you want to say something than say but don't accuse others."

That person surnamed Liao said: "I am saying what it is. Elder brother Qi, you just pretend to be an honest and upright person, you are trying to push the entire blame on my shoulder. It is actually a good strategy, killing two birds with one stone, you will get rid of me and also get the leadership uncontested." He said these words in a very loud voice.

That person surnamed Qi said: "You are seriously funny Shidi! Fellow disciple can all vouch that I already have the qualifications to take the leadership. I am the senior disciple as per the order, it's obvious."

Some said in strong voice: "keep your struggle to yourselves, do not involve me."

That person surnamed Liao said: "Of course, you are the senior fellow-disciple, Elder brother Qi, you were honest and good-natured person. You were just acting on behalf of other people, more as a puppet. You must think clearly about this matter and then make any decision."

Shi Potian heard these words and realized that there were a lot many people in the hall than he expected earlier. He immediately licked the window paper and punctured a hole gently and put his eye to look inside. He saw that unexpectedly more than 200-300 people, everyone wearing white gown were sitting in the hall; obviously they were all the snow mountain sect disciples.

This was actually the main hall of the Snow mountain sect and they were having some kind of big meeting. There were five large round-backed wooden armchairs at the far end, the middle was empty, and on both sides four people were sitting. He heard them still arguing continuously, from their talk Shi Potian understood that the person sitting on the left were surnamed Cheng and Liao and the one on the right hand side was the person surnamed Qi, another sickly looking person was sitting on the fourth chair. He was very thin, looking distressed from facial expression and extremely ugly by look.

At this time that person surnamed Liao said to that old person: "Liang Shidi, you have not said a word from beginning to end, what are your views?"

This person Liang sighed and shook his head and didn't spoke.

That person surnamed Qi said: "Liang Shidi did not speak, as he already know that you are talking nonsense."

That person surnamed Liao got angry and said: "You are not a roundworm in the stomach of Liang Shidi then how do you know that he is thinking that? This matter can be resolved if we four people help each other and come to a conclusion. We should all take the responsibility like real men and deal with this uncertainty, what do you say?"

That person surnamed Qi said: "Everybody covets life and fears death but we have come to this situation because of the desperate risk taken by some people."

That person surnamed Liao said in a loud voice suddenly: "Wan Li, you should also say something, how should we manage this situation?"

From the crowd, one person came out with his broken hand, "Dragon of wind and fire" Feng Wanli bowed in front of them and said: "Disciple is not used to these kinds of social meetings and matters however it will be catastrophic and a heinous crime if we harm him in our custody. The disciples approve of the Qi Shishu's idea that we cannot act again to commit such a violent treachery."

That person surnamed Liao said in a stern voice: "Then how do we deal with the disciples who have returned from the central plains?"

Feng Wanli said: "Shishu, I think it will be better to keep everybody of them in custody for the time being here in the city and then we will talk with each of them and decide."

That person surnamed Liao sneered and said: "Heh! Heh! Your idea is to imprison them all and then slowly interview them? I think I understand what really you want."

Feng Wanli said: "Liao Shishu, what do you mean by these words?"

That person surnamed Liao said: "Your disciples overwhelm us with numerical strength, your martial art skills are also high, and you will not attain the position of sect leader so you want to push all the blame on my head and got me killed. Four of my disciples are already dead here, you think I don't understand your plan!"

He shouted in a loud voice and called out suddenly: "Fellow disciples, this is a really calamitous situation. These people want to get rid of us now and here. If we don't stamp this source of trouble here then they will all butcher us!" As he said these words he took out his sword.

In a moment, several people rushed out forward and pulled out their swords. Suddenly about twenty-thirty people were surrounding Feng Wanli with swords in their hand. Another set of about sixty-seventy people surrounded them all.

Shi Potian thought: "It seems like Master Feng is being overwhelmed by sheer

numbers of these people, do not know that I should help which side?"

Feng Wanli yelled: "Cheng Shishu, Qi Shishu and Liang Shishu, are you also surrounded by disciples of Liao Shishu? Fourth branch is with him; take the second, third and fifth branch to retaliate."

The person surnamed Liao shouted: "Start!" Suddenly the fight started in the hall. Someone took out his sword and tried to stab Feng Wanli at his chest. Feng Wanli moved quickly and drew out the sword with his left and parried the incoming attack. He only heard a scoffing sound as suddenly his right sleeve was cut off by another attack.

Feng Wan Li and Bai Wanjian shared the honor of the best second generation martial art expert of the Snow mountain sect and their level of martial art expertise was just below these four but after he lost his right arm, he was still uncomfortable with using sword his left hand. That person surname Liao moved against him. This sword move has different variations and he traversed his sword a lot however Feng Wanli knew perfectly well that move of the opposite party and his background but the sword in his left hand didn't actually moved as he intended and unfortunately only lost a piece of his sleeve. He attacked at Feng Wanli but after two moved drew himself back and two other people took his place and attacked him.

That person surnamed Liao again shouted: "Why haven't you attacked yet?"

At this call all the sixty-seventy disciple of his fourth branch attacked rest of the disciples. Every one was fighting with another, the entire hall was in chaos and bright light sparkled in the hall as sword clashed with clanking sound of metal filling the hall and reverberating again and again. The snow mountain sect people who have assembled to discuss official business in the hall suddenly turned it in to the battlefield immediately.

That person surnamed Liao leaped over his people and saw that only second, third and fifth branch were retaliating and fighting against his disciples.

When he saw them all moving against him, he went wild with rage and yelled: "Second branch, third branch and fifth branch, you all are manipulated. These people are taking advantage of you and you all are ruining the big dream of this Snow mountain sect!"

His both eyes turned red and he moved towards his arch rival Qi. Two people parried and stabbed each other for quite some time. In term of martial arts, that person surnamed Liao was better than Qi and after about ten moves he forced him back repetitively.

That old sickly looking person held his sword, said: "The fourth branch, as they say, if the leader is such a barbarian then what will happen to the followers?" He moved towards the person surnamed Liao and attacked him. The person surnamed Qi saw the small advantage and immediately attacked Liao and stabbed towards his lower abdomen. The person surnamed Liao knew that he has met his doom so he also went reckless and started attacking all out.

Suddenly all three of them were attacking person surnamed Liao but his sword skills were good and survived against all of these three fellow apprentices but it was only a matter of time before they subdued him.

The numerous disciples of second, third and fifth branch saw their masters working in unison against the fourth branch and immediately attacked them with more vigor and intensity. In a few moments the tide turned completely and the fourth branch was butchered as shouts of anger, screams of despair echoed in the hall.

A'Xiu pulled Shi Potian on her side and said: "Elder brother, II am afraid...."

Shi Potian asked: "What is the matter? Why is everybody fighting?"

At this time everybody in the hall was busy in their own matter of life and death and no one cared if someone was talking outside or not.

Grandma Shi sneered and said: "Good, good, they are hitting well, killing each other so cleanly...it really like it.

Chapter 17 - Arrogant Insane Cheng

About a crowd of two hundred to three hundred was suddenly in sword fight, all were wearing identical white colored clothes and using similar long swords so it was pretty difficult to distinguish who is friend and who is enemy. Originally fourth branch was fighting with third branch but later second and fifth branch come in the aid of third. However afterwards some people started to take this opportunity to settle their own personal feuds with other people and started killing overtly or subtly whichever way it was possible. It was total chaos and confusion as no one knew what's going on.

Suddenly they heard a loud voice of something getting struck or falling to the ground and the two doors of the hall flew open with a loud bang sound and they heard a clear and resonant voice: "The envoys of the island of heroes have arrived to the Snow mountain sect to pay a visit and meet the leader of the sect!"

The pronunciation was such clear and bright that all the pandemonium kind of froze and everyone suddenly looked at these two people.

The people were surprised; some people gave up fighting and leapt in the one side. Gradually the others too stopped and got in control of their emotions and drew back to the wall and besides the groan of the wounded, there was no sound in the hall. Also at that moment the people who were severely wounded too also stopped crying and looked at the doors.

They saw two people standing at the entrance side by side, one fat person with a smiling face and another thin person with a sad facial expression. Shi Potian saw Zhang San and Li Si arriving at the door, he was nearly going to call but stopped himself at the last moment as he remembered he was still hiding and Grandma Shi didn't want to reveal her position at this moment.

Zhang San said with a smile on his face: "No wonder the martial art of snow mountain sect is so famous in the martial art world. Actually other schools practice martial arts but you people stab and chop and unexpectedly even kill for attaining greater heights...So earnest, rare... rare! I really admire, I really admire!"

That person surnamed Liao, known as Liao Zili stepped up forward and said: "Are you two honorable people envoys from the island of heroes?"

Zhang San said: "Do you know who the leader of the snow mountain sect is? We are from the island of the heroes and want to invite the leader of the sect to eat the meat gruel and present him with these bronze medals."

As he said these words he took out two bronze medals from his bosom and turned towards Li Si and said: "I have heard that the leader of the snow mountain sect is the "power and virtue gentleman" old master Bai however no one looks like him."

Li Si shook his head and said: "I too do not find anyone looking like him."

Liao Zili said: "Old master Bai has already died, the new leader" he has not even finished his words, Feng Wanli interrupted and scolded: "Breaks wind! The "power and virtue gentleman" has not died, but"

Liao Zili got angry: "You spoke to your Shishu in this manner, where is the discipline and respects for the elders?"

Feng Wanli replied: "Your kind of person doesn't deserve to be respected even if he is elder!"

Liao Zili took out his sword and attacked at Feng Wanli. Feng Wanli too wielded his sword to deflect his attack and drew back one step. Liao Zili moved forward and attacked him with a straight sword move. Another disciple came forward and attacked him. Immediately Qi Zimian and Liang Zijin too wielded their sword and killed a couple of people.

The snow mountain sect was actually a big sect; the rivalry among different clans and families within the sect was significant. These four people were obviously jealous of each other and take the side as per the opportunity. At this time when there was no leader and the leadership was at grab, these people didn't care about the danger from these two envoys of "Command of reward and punishment" but thought to take advantage of this situation to gain upper hand in the internal struggle of the sect first and then later handle the matter of invitation to island of heroes.

Zhang San said with a smile: "Every one is thoroughly busy to study the

swordsmanship and improve his martial art skill...this is a fine deed but you people can do this later, we don't have that much time. Does the snow mountain sect have a leader?"

As he was saying these words he gradually moved forward, he stretched out both his hands and started grabbing swords randomly, within a few moments everyone heard a metallic sound as about seven-eight swords were thrown on the ground. This included Liao Zili, Liang Zijin, Feng Wanli and several other second generation disciples. They didn't even understood how unexpectedly Zhang San managed to seize their sword all at once. Various people only felt that their arm shook and suddenly they lost their swords.

The color of everyone in the hall suddenly changed as they saw this in with amazement, they knew that these people have very high level of martial arts but they never thought that this can be done so easily. Everyone immediately put behind the internal struggle and recalled to their mind the tales of these two envoys of command of reward and punishment. They recalled the stories of the annihilation of the entire sects and couldn't restrain themselves from shivering.

Earlier people thought that the Snow mountain sect is in the western region and even to reach the Ling Xiao city is a very difficult task so it's really difficult that they will receive the invitation from command of reward and punishment but again people thought that the stories of the envoys of island of heroes was more like a hearsay and exaggerated mostly, they might not be that fierce; Moreover the leader of the snow mountain sect "power and virtue gentleman" old master Bai was like a comfortable big tree to provide shade and save them from any foe so no one really cared about this matter. Who would have thought suddenly, these people will come and after watchinf their martial art skills, no one can say that their skills were exaggerated. In the past thirty years, whoever has gone to the island of heroes has not come back. At this time now the leader of the Snow mountain sect was to get this invitation but who will take the suicide post now after these two have already arrived.

Just before their arrival these five people were struggling to attain hegemony and hoping to take the position of the leader of the sect. All these people were manipulating strategically and fighting in shadows but unexpectedly the opportunity has come for everyone to fight directly and take the leadership but

no one was willing now. As if by prior agreement, suddenly the three senior disciples pointed towards Liao Zili and said: "He is.....he is the leader!"

Instantly there was silence in the hall.

Liao Zili was not going to be silent and accept this situation, he said: "Three senior fellow-pupils are oldest, It's logical that the leadership should go to one of you."

Qi Zimian said: "What is the use of old? Liao Shidi, your martial art skills are really high and in addition you are the most capable person and you were also striving so hard for this position so you should become the leader. If Liao Shidi does not become the leader of the sect then even if other people will take the seat still it will be worthless."

Liang Zijin said: "This leader should go to the senior fellow disciples; if the elders are not willing to take the leadership then obviously the other senior fellow disciples should take the leadership, what is the struggle and indecision?"

Cheng Zixue said: "In our four people we are not willing to take the leadership then we should look for some one else who is capable. I approve of this solution to give the leadership to the senior disciples from next generation. Today he had also showed exemplary wisdom and martial art skills."

Liao Zili said: "Leader should be someone who is well accepted among his peers and who is also a willing worker, I think Feng Shizhi is the best option. No one has any dissent with him and he is quite popular too. I too approve for him name."

Feng Wanli said: "Just a few moments ago you were shouting and urging everyone to kill me and now I am the most popular person, what kind of nonsense is this?"

Liao Zili looked at him with his stretching his eyebrows and was about to curse angrily, but changed his mind and said: "I am recommending your name and you people are calling me names. This is ridiculous and shameless act."

Zhang San was listening and smiling but did not say a word. Li Si actually could not bear and shouted: "This one is leader...that one is a leader....if you fight this way then we won't have a result after a fortnight."

Liang Zijin said: "You people have complied very quickly to become the senior disciple of the sect but when the disaster is on the door then you doesn't want to get implicated."

Cheng Zixue got angry: "Why have I implicated everybody, actually you are responsible." Five people started to again argue and the confusion continued.

Zhang San said with a smile: "I have an idea. Your five have to fight among yourselves and the one who wins will be the strongest and should take the leadership of the sect."

Five people looked at each other in blank dismay.

Zhang San also said: "When we people came just now, you people were ready to kill each other so what is the problem now. We two people don't want to miss on the esthetic pleasure. You people should start fighting or you people don't know that the temper of my elder brother is really high and I am afraid if he gets angry then he might exterminate the entire Snow mountain sect, then no one will become the leader of the sect. Fine... one...two... and three! Begin!"

Liao Zili first draws out his sword.

Zhang San said suddenly: "Who is standing outside the window and spying on us, I think it's someone from snow mountain sect only, please come in together! It doesn't matter if anyone has strong martial art or weak, no matter the seniority or size, I will get rid everybody if the leader doesn't accepts the invitation."

He moved his hand and something struck the two long windows and stirred it with tremendous force.

Grandma Shi said: "I'm going in!"

She pulled A'Xiu with her left hand and Shi Potian with her right and the three people entered the hall to shoulder to shoulder.

In the hall the color the facial expression of people changes as they saw Grandma Shi. All the four senior disciples of the Snow mountain sect wielded their swords and surrounded her immediately. Grandma Shi is only sneered at them but didn't say any word.

Feng Wanli actually went forward and bowed to salute, fluttered and said: "Master.....

MasterMaster-wife!"

Shi Potian was startled, he thought: "How is my teacher her master wife?"

Grandma Shi looked at him but did not pay any attention.

Zhang San said with a smile: "Is very good, is very good! This boy was pretending to be the leader of clan of eternal happiness but has actually come back to the Snow mountain sect!" Brother, you look exactly like our younger brother; it's really difficult to recognize who is who."

Li Si nodded and said:" He is glib and a thief with fox brain! There is an attractive little girl close to him; it's not our younger brother."

Shi Potian thought: "Eldest brother and second brother think that I am Shi Zhong Yu. So long as I did not speak, they won't recognize me."

Zhang San said: "Actually this lady is Madame Bai Lao. She had some dispute with old master Bai over the martial art matters but you people can still compete for the leadership of the sect. Everybody start then!"

Grandma Shi showed her hate to those people by her facial expression. She took the hands of Shi Potian and A'Xiu and moved aside. Cheng Zixue and other people did not dare to stop her and looked helplessly as she went and took the seat at the centre wooden chair.

Li Si shouted: "You are not starting to fight, what you are waiting for?"

Cheng Zixue said: "Fine!"

He moved his sword to stab at Liang Zijin. Liang Zijin wielded his sword to parry but staggered under his foot, He stood again and said: "Forgive your fellow disciple; I am no match for you!"

Liao Zili encouraged fighting together. Four people only moved about ten moves but the people looking at them shook their head secretly, they can easily see numerous loopholes in their swordsmanship. However the opponent was also not taking advantage of the loop holes and making false moves but no one was hurting anyone. If someone else saw their fight then they would really think

very badly about the sword skills of the first generation martial artist of Snow mountain sect and will think that they have only learned a couple of years of martial arts.

Obviously, these four people at this moment were not "vying for supremacy", but actually struggling to get defeated. No one was willing to become the leader of the sect at this point of time but they were forced to fight by these people so were generously making mistake and were reluctant to force their enemies to submission.

But since everybody was had the same intension no one is getting defeated. Liang Zijin slanted his body so that the sword will actually hit him. He suddenly cried: "Oh!" His left knee buckled under him and he leaned on his own sword leans and fell on the ground. He encourage Liao Zili to stab him at this very moment as he had left several openings but the opposite party did not fell in the trap and pretended to be as dumb as a wooden chicken. His sword could have easily stabbed the chest of the opponent but he deliberately moved his sword that he missed his mark.

Zhang San laughed and said: "Elder brother, we have seen a lot of martial art contest but this is truly a brilliant martial arts contest, more likely it's the first leg of an eight-legged trick, and I have truly broadened my horizon today. No wonder the martial art of the snow mountain sect is called so unique in the present age, it is really extra ordinary."

Shi Grandma Shi shouted: "Wan Li, what are you doing? Fight in a correct manner or move out!"

Feng Wanli said in a shivering sound: "YesWhen Liao Shishu is attacking, it's really difficult to avoid his moves and disciple truly did not know how to counter."

Grandma Shi said: "If you know then fight or if don't then move out or I will execute you immediately!"

Feng Wanli said: "Yes, yes, disciple will follow your command." As he said these words he turned and came out of the fight.

Zhang San said with a smile: "Holds on a minute! Your Excellency is also the contender for the leadership of snow mountain sect, how can you move out so

rashly?

You! You! You! You!" He pointed to the four senior disciples of the snow mountain sect and said: "Your four people go and imprison this person and bring to us or your heads will look like this." His right hand searched for the wooden pole and grasped it and immediately a big hole appeared on it suggesting the abundant internal energy.

Those four snow mountain disciple cannot help but to shiver as they saw Zhang San directly looking at them with a menacing look and drumming with his right hand fingers as if telling them that next time it will be their head instead of the wooden pole.

At this time all four people had still their sword in their hand. When these four people listened to Zhang San's ridiculing jeer they did not dare to show much flaw but still their attack was really weak and feeble and they didn't attack anyone seriously. By their looks they all looked fearsome, jaws clenched and projected a fierce demeanor but their sword moves were slow. Earlier Grandma Shi had seen their sword moves and knew that their sword move like wind and their palm flashed like lightening and they were all really competitive.

Grandma Shi too looked angry by their behavior and shouted: "You clever people; is your martial art really from Snow mountain sect? Will you all lose the honor of the Ling Xiao city in such a despicable manner?"

She turned her head to Shi Potian and said: "Boy, take this broadsword and chop one arm of all these fellows."

Shi Potian did not dare to open his mouth in front of Zhang San and Li Si and received the broadsword from Grandma Shi and brandished to strike.

Cheng Zixue heard Grandma Shi asking Shi Potian to cut of their arm and thought that she may not be joking, he saw with his own eyes that his broadsword was really a very efficient weapon and it can create a dignified ruthless move.

Zhang San cheered: "Now this is some sword."

Shi Potian moved towards them but thought: "Eldest brother, second brother knew that my internal energy is good, if I depend on internal energy then they

will recognize that I am Gouzazhong and not Shi Zhong Yu. If I have to pretend like Shi ZhongYu then I have to rely on my swordsmanship."

He brandished the broadsword in a slanting motion and made a move of the snow mountain sect called "dark fragrant sparse shade". Cheng Zixue saw this move and found it pretty average and under his heart no longer feared his opponent. He too moved his sword and attacked his strategic point to lock the acu-points but never attacked fiercely and tried to defeat him. After several moves he caused his sword to stab at his own left leg and disguised that he is severely injured. He threw his sword in the place and said in a mournful voice: "Heroes left in the youth, old man is useless."

Liang Zijin wielded his sword and attacked towards Shi Potian and shouted in a loud voice: "You young fellow are really lawless, you have dared to injure your Shishu!"

He fought with Shi Potian for some time and tried to understand his moves. After some time he made a move called "yellow sand is luxuriant" and moved it gently near the boy and called out loudly by withdrawing three steps and kneeling down on left: "Serious, serious, this boy nearly chopped my arm."

Liao Zili and Qi both came forward and fought with Shi Potian, used a smart trick and cut himself by his own sword and admitted his defeat and drew back. They swung their head again and again, and tried to show every one that they are feeling dejected and shouted abuse in rage.

Grandma Shi said fiercely: "You have lost to this child, are you going to give the leadership of the sect to this boy?"

Liao, Liang and the others thought: "Present him the leadership of the sect and then send him to the island of the heroes as a scapegoat, why not?"

Cheng Zixue said: "The two envoys of Command of reward and punishment have settled the way to resolve this issue depending on martial art skills. My skill is inferior to this person and I acknowledge this fact."

Liao, Liang and Qi all too echoed these words.

Grandma Shi said: "Do you take refuse to accept him as leader?"

Four people said with one voice: "We are sincerely convinced about his ability

and we do not have any objection."

In their heart they actually thought: "If they are able to handle these two wicked people and make them go without any problem then why won't we accept? We can forgive this old woman and this little rascal."

Grandma Shi said: "fine then quickly pay respect to the new leader of the snow mountain sect." She thought that the senior disciple of her Golden phoenix sect has become the leader of the Snow mountain sect and in her heart, she was extremely happy.

Suddenly someone called from outside the hall in a clear voice: "Who is the new leader of the Snow mountain sect?"

This was the sound of Bai Wanjian sound, the sound of shackles followed him as he came in, and in fact he actually was chained. About dozens of more people followed him in the hall. These people too have been chained and had shackles on their hand and feet. Bai Wanjian came first followed by Geng Wanzhong, Wanjun, Wang Wanren, Huyan Wanshan, Wen Wanfu, Wang Wanyi, Wan Zi and numerous other Snow mountain sect disciples who returned from central plains.

Bai Wanjian saw Grandma Shi and called out: "Mother, you have come back!" He was pleasantly surprised by this new development.

Shi Potian earlier listened to Feng Wanli calling Grandma Shi as master-wife but didn't gave much thought but now when Bai Wanjian called her mother, he no longer had any doubt and in fact he felt strange. He thought: "My Master is the wife of the sect leader of Snow mountain sect then why did she create a new Golden phoenix sect. Why is she proclaiming that the martial art of the Golden phoenix sect is better than that of the snow mountain sect?"

A'Xiu too rushed forward towards Bai Wanjian and called out: "Father!"

Shi Potian was again shocked when he understood that not only Grandma Shi is the mother of Bai Wanjian but A'Xiu is daughter of Bai Wanjian.

Bai Wanjian felt great happiness, he fluttered and said: "A'Xiu, youYouare alive? You haven't died!"

Grandma Shi said in a calm voice: "Obviously she is alive, she hasn't died! Why are you crying like a baby? You still have the face to call me a mother! I really

wished to hit you cleanly! That old bastard is hiding somewhere behind a pile of rubbish and you yourself are chained in these shackles. What happened to the mighty "frost of North west"?

"The frost of the Northwest"... you really irritate me! Damn what is this snow mountain sect doing nowadays...playing handcuffs and shackles. Have you all forgotten your martial art skills? The one who is old is the bastard, actually the younger one is also a bastard, damn the fellow, the disciples and the son and grandson, altogether everyone is bastard, This Snow mountain sect is actually a wrong name, the proper name should be the bastard sect!"

Bai Wanjian waited for her to vent her anger and then said: "Mother, the child and numerous fellow disciples have not lost in some martial art contest and get captured. These thieves have plotted against us and him" he pointed at Liao Zili and said in an angry voice: "This fellow has disguised as father and hid in his room and trapped me by vile methods....."

Grandma Shi angrily rebuked at him: "You young bastard are more unreasonable, you don't admit your own mistake, and you are same as your father but point at others?"

Shi Potian thought: "Admitting mistakes like your father, it is not strange. The Shi couple too admitted their mistake and I too have admitted my mistakes. Oh, but I don't know who my real father is."

Bai Wanjian got beaten and scold by his mother since childhood, but at this moment she was scolding him in the presence of everyone, although he felt ashamed but he was more concerned about his father's safety, he asked: "Mother, Is father safe?"

Grandma Shi got angrier, she said: "Old bastard dies or lives, who cares, if this young bastard doesn't know then how will I know? The old bastard lived in the world to disgrace himself, the fellow disciples are also following him, and it might be well if all of them die too!"

Feng Wanli came forward and said: "Master-wife, master is not dead...he is ... he is just imprisoned."

Bai Wanjian listened, once he knew that his father is just imprisoned but he was not hurt and actually kept in a place where he is not harming anyone, he felt

relived in his heart and said immediately: "Thank God, father is safe!"

Grandma Shi scolded: "Is safe!" He was scolding with her mouth and cursing angrily but in her heart actually she also cared for him and asked Cheng Zixue and others: "Where have you imprisoned your senior fellow disciple? Why are you not releasing him?"

Cheng Zixue said: "senior fellow disciple is much more hot-tempered nowadays and no one dares to approach him or he kills people."

A gentle smile appeared on the face of Grandma Shi and she said: "Good, good, good! This old bastard thinks that his martial art is the best under the heaven, he is extremely arrogant, actually he is insufferably arrogant, let him suffer more and learn some humility."

Li Si listened to her cursing angrily continuously, he said: "So this bastard fellow, is he the leader of the sect?"

Grandma Shi stood up suddenly; he took a couple of step forward towards them and said in a loud voice: "You just called the leader of this sect a bastard? How dare you? I scolded my husband and son, what kind of thing you are and dare to speak about the Snow mountain sect in this manner? Your martial art is good but it doesn't give you the right to abuse others. You can kill the person but you can't humiliate them!"

Other people heard her scolding Li Si in such harsh words and couldn't restrain themselves from sweating. They were afraid that he might get angry and start killing them too.

Shi Potian came in front of Grandma Shi to cover her and thought that if Li Si attacks her then he can keep him off his master.

Bai Wanjian was suffering in his shackles and was not able to move freely but didn't complain of hardship. Li Si saw that so he smiled and said: "Good! I made an indiscreet remark, I apologize, and I ask Madam Bai to forgive me! Then who is the leader of snow mountain sect."

Grandma Shi pointed to Shi Potian and said: "This youth has defeated all the senior disciples of the Snow mountain sect and these people are also accepting him as the sect leader of the Snow mountain sect. Does anyone have any

problem with that?"

Bai Wanjian said loudly: "Child refuses to accept, I must fight with him!"

Grandma Shi said: "Good! Open the handcuffs and the shackles!"

The four senior fellow disciples looked at each other in blank dismay and thought: "If a disciple from the lower generation defeats this young fellow then it will look really bad for us. This stupid person is defying his seniors and also doesn't want to live himself but at present circumstance, they could do nothing to rectify this situation."

Liao Zili turns his head to Bai Wanjian and said: "You are already defeated, why are you fighting with this young boy?"

Bai Wanjian got angry and said: "You people are defying your elders and rebelling against the sect. I wish I could have torn you in to shreds. You do such shameless and cowardly acts and you have the audacity to come to me and ask me to withdraw from the fight? You said I was defeated....tell me how does attacking a person in dark and capturing can be called victory?"

Originally if the leader of the Snow mountain sect would have died then these four people would have been the only contender to become the sect leader as per their martial art skills. Although these four were also the senior disciple of the Snow Mountain sect but the difference in their martial art and the martial art of Bai Zizai was really great. The sword skills of the snow mountain sect have grown to be exquisite but the internal energy of their sect was not that great.

Bai Zizai had took some snake gallbladder and snake blood by coincidence on the snow mountain region long ago so his internal energy increased many folds. When he taught his disciples the martial art skills he didn't held back anything but the internal strength of any of his fellow disciples or second generation disciples didn't increased to his level. They all thought that Bai Zizai is holding back some of the knowledge and is flaunting his superiority but they didn't knew the right reason for his internal energy.

As time went past, these four fellow disciples actually grew jealous of his achievements and on the other hand suspected that he is not teaching all his martial arts to them and a deep enmity seeded in their heart. As Bai Wanjian grew older and his martial art skills improved they all suspected that he is

teaching him some of the secret ancestral skills and in their own selfishness hated Bai Zizai even more. "Power and virtue gentleman" Bai Zizai had enormous reputation and influence so no one dared to complain against him. However this time when Bai Zizai and numerous of his followers went to the central plains, suddenly Bai Zizai started behaving like a mentally ill person and because of his lunatic behavior a lot people were killed in the Ling Xiao city.

People were in precarious state so numerous fellow disciples were both compel by the necessity and opportunity of the situation and launched an attack against him and imprisoned him.

When Bai Wanjian returned with his numerous disciples to Ling Xiao city; Liao Zili hid on the bed of Bai Zizai and forced her concubine to send Bai Wanjian in the room. He feigned that he was Bai Zizai and seized Bai Wanjian by trickery. They also caught all the disciples who have returned from central plain as they might have supported Bai Wanjian. At this moment when Bai Wanjian saw Liao Zili, he could not restrain himself and wanted to fight with him.

Liao Zili said: "You, if you were not defeated than how are you chained in these handcuffs and shackles?"

Li Si shouted in a loud voice: "This dispute is unclear quite so quickly open the handcuffs and shackles so these two people can fight"

Liao Zili still hesitated; Li Si moved his left hand and took out Liao Zili's sword. They heard the sound of sword hitting the metal and with four such sounds the shackles and chains were on the ground.

These handcuffs and shackles were cast by fine steel, although Liao Zili's sword was a sharp weapon but he actually cut through the iron like mud. He actually applied his vigorous internal energy to accomplish this task. The handcuffs and shackles links fell on the ground but Bai Wanjian had not a single blood stain on his body and people couldn't but cheered loudly. Several people even tried to curry favor and flatter Li Si and called "fine" and "well-done" kind of words.

Bai Wanjian is always proud, extremely little convincing, at this time could not restrain himself and said: "good! I really admire your skills!" In the meantime one disciple had already delivered him the sword.

Bai Wanjian made a "bah" sound and spitted towards Liao Zili and raised his

foot to kick him. He scolded: "Rebel!" Liao Zili moved back to avoid his attack.

A'Xiu called out with concern: "Father!" She came forward holding her sword and offered him her sword.

Bai Wanjian showed a faint smile and said: "Clever daughter!" He had suffered during these past day by these tyrannical people but when he saw that his mother and daughter are safe and came back, he was extremely happy however as soon as he has turned his head, the color on his face changed and his facial expression turned from happiness to hatred. He stared at Liao Zili as if his eyes will pour fire and scolded: "You rebel, you are my elder but still I will not spare you!" he brushes his sword and stabbed at him.

Li Si reversed the long sword he took from Liao Zili to free Bai Wanjian from shackles and gently squeezed it in the hand of Liao Zili.

Two people now launched themselves at each other. This time it was an actual fight as both attacked each other with vigor and intensity. Earlier when they were fighting then it looked like a child's play as everyone was trying to lose but this time the duel was a real fight and they displayed unsurpassed artistry and savage intent simultaneously.

Liao Zili was the best fighter among the first generation disciples of the snow mountain sect; he knew that Bai Wanjian has an ardent desire to kill him at this moment so he can't be lazy or negligent at this moment. He moved his sword nimbly and resourcefully and made several ruthless moves.

Bai Wanjian was actually eager to take revenge of his disgrace and didn't manage to calm down during the fight. He was too intent on finding an opening to get Liao Zili and after about thirty moves Liao Zili found an opening and thrust his sword towards him. Bai Wanjian slanted his body but the sword of Liao Zili flashed through injuring his arm and truncated a part of his sleeves.

A'Xiu called out in concern. Grandma Shi scolded: "Young bastard is entirely alike his father, the old bastard has taught his son but it's all in vain, he too is of no use."

Bai Wanjian was anxious in his heart; his sword moves were irregular and disordered. Liao Zili smiled at him in a condescending manner and said: "I already said that you have been defeated, do you still want to prove me wrong?"

He wanted to harass the opposite party and wanted him to make another mistake in anger. Bai Wanjian had faced numerous setbacks in his tour to the central plain this time, when Liao Zili ridiculed him again; he tried to keep his calm and composed demeanor and tried to not get agitated. He did not get angry and instead didn't attack him for several moves and made seven defensive moves continually. In a short time the mood of the battle changed and Bai Wanjian again composed himself and started attacking steadily.

Liao Zili moved around quickly but didn't stop taunting, the sword play continued with alarming speed. Bai Wanjian cried loud and he made three successive attacks on Liao Zili, the fourth move looked as if a blue streak has appeared in the air and suddenly Liao Zili shouted loudly and miserably as he got hit on his leg and blood started pooling on the ground.

Bai Wanjian moved his sword and slanted it towards others and said: "You can come now!" Blood dripped from his sword tip as he challenged all of them.

Cheng Zixue looked deathly pale, he pressed his hands on the sword hilt but did not draw it out and said: "You must be the leader.....I did not want any struggle with you."

Bai Wanjian looked at Qi Zimian and Liang Zijin. Both of them shook their head and declined the challenge.

Grandma Shi said suddenly: "You have defeated these rebels, what's great about that?" She said to Shi Potian: "child, you go and compare your martial art skill with the protégé of that old bastard; If his disciple is fiercer than so is my disciple."

The people were greatly surprised: "This Shi Zhong Yu is the disciple of Feng Wanli, how is he then her disciple?"

Grandma Shi shouted in a loud voice: "Go forward quickly! Use the broadsword, the old bastard has taught him some mediocre swordsmanship; our sword skills are much better than them."

In reality Shi Potian was not willing to fight with Bai Wanjian and compare his martial arts skills, he was father of A'Xiu and did not want to offend him but if he opens his mouth to refuse than will immediately give away his identity and Zhang San and Li Si might recognize him. He raised his broadsword but he has an

awkward look on his face.

Grandma Shi said: "I had consented a moment ago about a matter, don't you want that to happen? I wanted you to establish a great merit. If you want keep your promise than I will grant you that. This is that big merit, you have to defeat this disciple of that old bastard. If you lose than immediately leave this place without saying goodbye to me or A'Xiu and never show your face to us."

Shi Potian extended his left hand to scratch his head, he was greatly surprised, he thought: "Originally master asked me to accomplish one great merit, did she really wanted to defeat her own son. This matter is seriously strange." From his expression everyone can see that he was really confused.

Other people thought about her actions and thought: "Grandma Shi wants this boy to win the leadership of the Snow mountain sect so he can go to the island of the heroes in order to avoid her son going there."

The temper of both Bai Zizai and Grandma Shi was really high and by nature both got angry instantly and were extremely proud people. Usually Grandma Shi always yielded to her husband but in her heart, she was filled with this constant indignation for a long time. When Shi Zhong Yu tried to harm A'Xiu and A'Xiu went missing then everybody thought that she has jumped from the cliff and is dead. Bai Zizai was angry and he broke Feng Wanli's arm and quarreled with Grandma Shi. In great anger he slapped his wife on her face. Grandma Shi was extremely angry and humiliated and she descended the mountain and searched for A'Xiu. After rescuing A'Xiu she didn't returned back to the Ling Xiao city as she remembered her humiliation.

Her martial art was inferior to her husband, she suddenly decided that she will take a disciple and teach him her martial art skills and will come back and defeat his disciple than only she can keep her self respect and honor.

However Bai Wanjian thought that this person is in fact Shi ZhongYu and didn't understand at all that how is this person her mother's disciple? He only knew that this person had once tried to violate his daughter and his face turned with extreme hatred as he saw this person again.

Grandma Shi said: "What's wrong? What are you looking at? This youth has done obeisance in front of me and accepted me as his teacher, after my training,

his martial art skills have improved considerably. Now you and he contend in martial arts, if you win than I will accept that your master that old bastard is better but If you get defeated by him than A'Xiu will be his wife."

Bai Wanjian was startled, he said: "Mother, this matter is not related to her at all, how A'Xiu can marry this boy?"

Grandma Shi said with a smile: "You, if you are defeated by this boy, obviously you are not good enough to protect her so A'Xiu will marry the person who is capable and competent."

Bai Wanjian was really angry and said: "Mother, you have differences with father and you are angry with him than why are you venting your anger on me. If your son doesn't fight with this boy than how is the other matter related to this."

Grandma Shi saw him scowling, she shouted in loud voice: "if you don't accept this deal then put down your sword. What kind of nonsense are you spouting for so much time?"

Bai Wanjian said: "Yes, I am ready!" he said to Shi Potian: "Your move."

Shi Potian looked at A'Xiu once, she really looked charming but at the same time she was really concerned too. He thought: "Master said that if I lose than I can't even say goodbye to A'Xiu. This martial arts contest might be right or wrong but I have to win it at any cost." Therefore he left his broadsword hanging and used his left hand to grasp the right fist, bows slightly. Afterwards he took out the broadsword made the first move of the Golden phoenix sect called "asking for trouble". He did not know that "asking for trouble" is actually a kind of cursing. Bai Wanjian did not know the name of the move but from his attitude he looked respectful. He too wielded his long sword and made his move.

Shi Potian brandished his broadsword to parry his sword. When he once fought with Bai Wanjian earlier on the Azure mist island then he fought with a rotten hatchet and Bai Wanjian defeated him with a very elementary move of the Snow mountain sect and he was not able to resist it. Afterward Shi Qing and Min Rou directed him about the use of the sword skills. He understood the fact that rigid sword techniques can't be followed in a martial art contest and one cannot adhere to same style.

This time when he was fighting with Bai Wanjian, even though he executed a very ordinary martial art move but this time he integrated his superior internal energy with each move too as taught by the Shi couple. Even if the sword skill is mediocre but if it is accompanied by his enormous internal energy than it was really effective.

After about ten moves, Bai Wanjian was secretly startled in his heart and thought: "This boy has really learnt some good sword skills."

He suddenly remembered the day on Azure Mist Island when he fought with Shi Potian. He remembered that at that day the youth from the clan of eternal happiness told him that he was the senior disciple of the Golden Phoenix sect however his sword skill and this person's sword skills are vaguely similar. The skills of Shi ZhongYu should be far inferior. He thought: "These face of these two people are similar, is it possible that he is not Shi ZhongYu. My mother said that she has trained this person but how is that possible?"

When Grandma Shi and Bai Zizai were newly-married, both people discussed martial art skills. They once tried to match their skills, obviously Bai Zizai had better martial art skills and Grandma Shi lost. Bai Zizai stopped immediately but started to blows his own horn. Grandma Shi was ashamed that her martial art skills were inferior to her husband and after that incident did not demonstrated her martial arts again so Bai Wanjian never got the opportunity to know the martial art skills and sword skills of her mother.

After several moves, Bai Wanjian swiped with the horizontal sword; Shi Potian lifted his own broadsword to directly intercept the attack. As the two swords collided, spark of fire splashed in the air. As soon as the swords clashed Bai Wanjian felt as if entire arm went numb and he felt vigorous pain in his chest. He couldn't restrain himself from getting startled and drew back three steps.

Shi Potian did not pursue him, turns his head to look at Grandma Shi as if asking: "Do I win now?"

But as Bai Wanjian met a powerful enemy, his courage too increased many folds. Apart from that this was the same person who has tried to violate A'Xiu and A'Xiu disappeared after that incident only so he really despised this person and also he was from a younger generation, if loses to him now than he will lose

his face in the martial art world.

He shouted in a loud voice: "Boy, look out for the sword!"

He rushed ahead three steps, he stabbed towards him with his sword and then waited for Shi Potian to resist, no longer than Shi Potian used his weapon to intercept his attack, Bai Wanjian immediately changed his move and attacked towards the enemy's throat. This move "traces of the past" was extremely skillful move of the Snow mountain sect and displayed unsurpassed artistry.

Zhang San said: "Good swordsmanship!"

Shi Potian made the horizontal sword swipe initially but at the last moment held back his arm and executed the move from the golden phoenix sect called "strolls in the snow to seek plum"; this move was the counter move to Bai Wanjian's move. It literally meant that if you trample the snowy area to seek the plum then how would it be possible to trace the past?

Zhang San again said: "Good sword skill!"

Two people started fighting in a lightning pace, Bai Wanjian was better in sword skills but Shi Potian had enormous internal energy. They fought for about twenty more moves, Shi Potian made a straight thrust towards Bai Wanjian, this move was extremely swift and fierce, Bai Wanjian was late to react but still managed to intercept the sword by making a horizontal sword swipe, suddenly he felt a great impact on his hand and he couldn't manage to hold his sword and it fell on the ground unexpectedly.

Shi Potian withdrew his broadsword immediately and moved back few steps.

Bai Wanjian's complexion turned pale, he immediately snatched a long sword from the snow mountain disciple hand and again attacked Shi Potian.

Shi Potian was actually fighting pretty comfortable using his internal energy and attacking Bai Wanjian unceasingly. It was getting pretty difficult for Bai Wanjian to resist each of his moves as every time the broadsword was accompanied by a strong incomparable strength. As they traded about four more move Bai Wanjian felt that it was getting more and more difficult to even hold his sword.

Bai Wanjian said loudly: "Your internal energy is far superior than me but I am

not losing in terms of sword skills." As he said these words, he launched another attack on Shi Potian.

Shi Potian slanted his body to avoid his attack and hoped that Grandma Shi will issue an order and ask him to stop this fight but as he looked at her he actually saw her smiling and had a smug look on her face.

He looked at A'Xiu standing besides her grandmother and found her greatly concerned and worried. He immediately remembered her conversation with A'Xiu on the Azure mist island. She told him that a person shouldn't be ruthless in the martial art world. She told him: "Elder brother, the people in the martial arts world are mostly good people. If you fight with a person and win against him than you can't humiliate him as he will lose his face in front of other and will either try to take your life or give his life. This way a blood feud will start and killing some one never solves any purpose."

He saw with his own eyes that Bai Wanjian has a very dignified demeanor, he thought: "He is has great fame in the snow mountain sect and he is such a popular person. If I defeat him than he will be humiliated in front of everyone but if I lose to him, then master said that I can't even say goodbye to A'Xiu, what should I do?"

He again remembered that A'Xiu told him that if a person is losing to you than even though you are winning still acknowledge your defeat and give him a face. This way no one will lose and that person will also be deeply grateful and there won't be any enmity. A'Xiu taught him a move called "to make a veiled attack"; He thought that he should execute that move."

He immediately made a sword move and knowingly left a big opening on his right side. Bai Wanjian was fighting with all his intensity and vigor, as soon as he saw this opening he immediately attacked at his right side.

This time Shi Potian delayed his sword move to intercept this move so that Bai Wanjian can at least connect his body. As soon as the point of long sword touched Shi Potian's chest, Bai Wanjian felt a massive shock and if a thunder and lightning had struck him and immediately threw his sword away.

Shi Potian had drawn back two steps, he thought: "He has lost his sword now three times, I think I should also leave my broadsword."

He immediately applied a vigorous surge of internal energy on his broadsword and in a moment the broadsword broke in two sections.

A'Xiu felt extremely relieved, she called out loud: "Father, elder brother, you two are fighting for such a long time, I think it's a draw, no one wins!"

She turned her head to look at Shi Potian and smiled, she thought: "You remembered my words and realized my intention." She couldn't restrain her happiness and under her heart was delighted beyond measure.

Bai Wanjian's face actually turned scarlet, he didn't pick his sword this time and turned to Shi Potian and said: "You are yielding, how can I surnamed Bai accept that. You have given me face in front of everyone, I am really grateful for your kindness."

Grandma Shi was very self-satisfied, she said: "Child, don't be sad. This sword skill is taught to him by your mother. I will also pass it to you. You have not lost to him but in fact you lost to your mother. What are you ashamed of?"

Formerly she was really angry and calling them "old bastard" and "young bastard" and scolded continuously but after he got defeated by Shi Potian and her Golden phoenix sect, she was really happy and comforted her son.

Bai Wanjian does not know whether to laugh or cry and only managed to say: "The sword skill of mother is really fierce; I only fear that the child is too stupid, and cannot learn."

Grandma Shi arrived at his side and stroked his hair gently and said: "if this dumb kid can learn it than how can you not learn?"

She turns her head to Shi Potian and said: "Kowtow in front of your wife's father and ask for forgiveness quickly."

For a moment Shi Potian didn't understood but suddenly he understood that she was asking him to kowtow in front of Bai Wanjian and was pleasantly surprised. He hurriedly knelt in front of Bai Wanjian.

Bai Wanjian moved sideways to avoid him and said fiercely: "Hold on a minute, this needs to be reconsidered."

He said to Grandma Shi: "Although mother, the martial art skill of this boy is

high but he is actually a frivolous person with poor character, it will be a big mistake to marry him with A'Xiu."

He only heard Li Si saying in a loud voice: "It was good, really good! Whether you accept him as your son-in-law or not it does not matter but we will definitely drink a celebration drinks eventually. During this time no one in the Snow mountain sect managed to defeat our little brother here so obviously he is the new leader, isn't it? Does anybody refuse to accept it?"

Bai Wanjian didn't say anything neither did the other people from the snow mountain sect made any noise. Some were thinking that even if his martial art skills are inferior still if he becomes the leader than he has to leave for the island of heroes. everyone stayed silent in the hall and no one raised any objection.

Zhang San took out the two copper medals from his bosom and said with a smile: "Congratulation brother, you are now the leader of the snow mountain sect, take these two bronze medals too and keep with the one we earlier gave you in the past!" As he said these words he turned toward Shi Potian and winked him.

Shi Potian asked with surprise: "Did elder brother recognize me when I came out? I haven't spoken anything until now?"

He knew that the martial art skills of Zhang San and Li Si were extremely high but their experience in the martial art realm was a cut above other people. Although Shi Potian did not make any sound and didn't explicitly show any weakness in his behavior but when he started fighting with Bai Wanjian, he used his internal energy. The level of his internal energy was actually really rare and unheard in the martial art realm. Zhang San and Li Si had once already drank their medicated wine with him and were aware of his superior internal energy. Once they saw him fighting than it was not really difficult for them to figure out that he is in fact Shi Potian.

As Shi Potian moved forward to accept the bronze medals, he thought: "I have already accepted the bronze medals as the chief of the clan of eternal happiness. What difference it makes if I die once or twice so what's the harm?"

He was just about to put out his hand to accept the medals, he heard Grandma Shi shouting suddenly: "Hold on a minute!"

Shi Potian drew back and turned his head to look at Grandma Shi and only listened her saying: "It was decided that the sect leader of the snow mountain sect will be decided on the basis of the martial art skills. However I saw that once the old bastard became the leader, he became conceited with all the power and prestige and became insufferably arrogant. I think this leadership is a kind of addiction. Child, it's better to give the leadership of the sect to me!"

Shi Potian said in consternation: "what.....Do I give the leadership to you?"

Grandma Shi had really sincere feeling towards him and also he treasured A'Xiu more than anything else so she doesn't want Shi Potian to go to the island of the heroes and waste his life. In her last few years, she has lived the life of several years and didn't have any desire left. She thought it's probably better to receive the bronze medals and let the young children live their life.

Of course she didn't have any knowledge about matter of clan of eternal happiness. She got angry immediately and said: "What's wrong? Aren't you willing? Then we have to fight it out and decide who has the better martial art skills."

Shi Potian saw her to getting angry and did not dare to say again, he looked at her and said: "Yes, yes!" He bowed in front of her and withdrew.

Grandma Shi smiled and said: "Is there anyone else who declines to accept me as the leader of the snow mountain sect, tell me now if someone refuses to accept?"

The people look at each other in blank dismay, this came as another shock but no one said anything again.

Grandma Shi stepped forward to receive the two bronze medals from Zhang San's hand and said: "I am the leader of the Snow mountain sect, many thanks for arriving at our sect and for the invitation to island of heroes."

Zhang San smiled and said: "Madame Bai Lao, Although you are accepting the bronze medals personally but if the "power and virtue gentleman" Bai Zizai come back and contend in martial arts with you and ask for the leadership of the sect, then who will be the leader? Good, you husbands and wife decide the victory or defeat based on your martial art skill and send the leader."

Zhang San looked at Li Si and smiled and suddenly both of them turned and move out from the front door. People only heard them laughing and moving leaving in flash.

Grandma Shi comes back to that large round-backed wooden armchair and sits on it, she had now calmed down, she said: "open the shackles for these people and free them."

Liang Zijin said: "Why should we follow your orders? The leadership of snow mountain sect is not some child's play that can be given and taken on anyone's whim?"

Other people too started to get encouraged and said simultaneously: "You had not fought even a single fight. We can't give the leadership of the snow mountain sect based because of your family members."

When Zhang San and Li Si were in the hall, various people thought only of somehow getting rid of those two people and only hoped that some person will take the leadership and go to the island of the heroes so they can be saved from the great misfortune. Now that the two people have gone back; everyone thought that now grandma Shi might investigate the issue related to old master Bai and they will all be implicated for the grave offence. Surely there will retaliation and it was directly a matter of life and death. Several people in the hall created a clamor immediately.

Grandma Shi said: "Good, you refuse to accept me to make sect leader; that is fine with me as well." She took out the two bronze medals from her bosom and threw it in front of them and said: "Whoever wants to be the sect leader and go to the island of the heroes, please come forward and accept those bronze medals. That fat person had said a moment ago, although I have accepted the bronze medal but the invitation is valid for the leader of the snow mountains sect depending upon the martial art skills."

As soon as Grandma Shi said these words, Qi Zimian, Liang Zijin and others moved back immediately one by one. Various people who were shouting quickly went silent and did not dare to touch those bronze medals.

Feng Wanli came forward and said: "Master wife, everybody has defied their own seniors and elders. We were disobedient to the master and have in reality

committed a heinous crime but actually we all were in unavoidable circumstances."

As he said these words, he fell on both his knees and kowtowed in front of her again and again and said: "Master wife Shi is the sect leader of the snow mountain sect, this is good. Master wife, you must kill the disciple and disciple is willing to take the responsibility but I ask for amnesty for the crimes of other fellow disciples. If you will give punishment to all the people than it will be a great disaster for the sect and it will be pretty difficult to recover from that."

Grandma Shi said: "Your master has a bad temperament, how won't I know? He broke your arm in anger when he shouldn't. What is this matter all about, tell me in detail."

Feng Wanli looked at her and said: "master wife, After Bai Shige and numerous fellow disciples descended the mountain and went to central plains, master used to throw a fit every now and then. The disciples were beaten and scolded by him; this was of course a minor matter as everybody had received great graciousness from master so how dare could one complain against it? However about half a month ago, two old people came to visit the master suddenly. Those two brothers were called Ding Busi and Ding Busan"

Grandma Shi was startled and said: "Ding Busi.....Ding Busi? What was that fellow doing in the Ling Xiao city?"

Feng Wanli said: "After these two old people came in the Ling Xiao city they paid visit to master and went to the study to talk in private. What was actually discussed, the disciple does not know but I only understood that those two old people somehow offended the master and the three people quarreled loudly. The people thought that the master and these two people are probably from the same generation. We were not sure about the origin of these two people so we did not dare to get inside the study and intervene."

We only waited for master to expel these people out of the place but we instead heard those Ding brothers actually abusing master and saying something about the "Azure conch mountain", some "Azure Mist island" and also talking about some female called "Xiao cui" (literally little green jade)."

The complexion of Grandma Shi changed suddenly. She was actually called

"Xiao cui" but numerous people in the hall did not know about this and she didn't want to share that so she asked: "what happened after that?"

Feng Wanli said: "Afterwards we did not know how the fight actually started but we heard the sound of palm wind whistling and various sound of people fighting. Master had given us a verbal command, so we didn't dare to go. After some time we heard the sound of the wall shaking and in fact the walls of study eventually collapsed. We understood that master is pressing both of these Ding brothers against the wall and they were somehow resisting against his palm strength even though the wall collapsed. After some time even though two were fighting against one, master was still winning but Ding Busi managed to strike master on his chest and he spat blood."

Grandma Shi asked suddenly: "what?"

Feng Wanli continued: "Master was hit in his chest and he spat blood but he still pressed both of them and they didn't manage to escape. After sometime master himself spoke: "The victory or defeat has actually no meaning but if someone gets seriously injured then it will lead to irreconcilable enmity? And he withdrew. Ding Busi and Ding Busan immediately left the Ling Xiao cit after that moment."

Grandma Shi nodded and asked: "After they left, later did they come back again?"

Feng Wanli said: "These two old people didn't return after that incident but there was a drastic change in master after that. Something happened with his intelligence and he started behaving abnormally. Sometimes he will laugh for a day and say aloud: "I have defeated that thief Ding Busi, he will remember his defeat this time? He said that Xiao cui had been in Azure Conch Mountain....."

Grandma Shi shouted angrily: "Nonsense, what does this matter have to do with this?"

Feng Wanli said: "Yes, yes, master also said that he was talking nonsense. He said that old thief was deceiving people, why would Xiao cui go to his Azure Conch Mountain? However....he did not believe his honeyed words but still master looked really confused and concerned about that matter....."

The complexion of Grandma Shi turned pale for a while, she shouted: "Old

bastard talked nonsense, why was he confused and concerned?"

Feng Wanli didn't actually understand the matter and simply said: "Yes, yes!"

Grandma Shi also asked: "What else did that old bastard said?"

Feng Wanli said: "Are you talking about master?"

Grandma Shi said: "Obviously, who else is the old bastard"

Feng Wanli got ashamed and said: "Master was henceforth worried and said: "Has she gone to the Azure conch mountains? Certainly, she isn't there. Perhaps she was bored in the martial art realm and might have been feeling lonely so she might have gone just to talk but it is really difficult to sayreally difficult to say. Perhaps the past friendship is not forgotten, old feelings remain even after a severed relationship."

Grandma Shi scolded: "Breaks wind!"

Feng Wanli kneels on the ground and felt really awkward, how he can acknowledge that his master is "breaking wind".

Grandma Shi said: "Hey, stand up and tell me more about what happened afterwards."

Feng Wanli kowtowed and said: "Many thanks master-wife."

He stood up and said: "For two days master laughed out loud and we thought that he probably in better mood but after that suddenly his temper changed. Whenever he saw any person, he will ask: "In all over the world, whose martial art is the best?"

Everybody will always answer: "Obviously, your martial art is the best in the entire world. You are leader of the snow mountain sect, who can be better than you. "

The facial expressions of master were really entirely different from his former days. Sometimes he also asked:"How is my martial art?"

Everybody will always answer: "master, your internal energy is already unparalleled in the world; your swordsmanship is the present age is invincible, actually you do not need to use the sword, and there is no rival to you in this world."

He listens to us to reply like this that then smiled but won't make any sound and appeared really happy. That day he found one fellow disciple in the courtyard and asked him: "How is my martial art compared to the Shaolin school, if we compare it with their sect leader than whose martial art is high?"

We don't know that what exactly Lu Shidi replied but we afterwards saw that his head is turned in to pulp after master hit him with his palm."

Grandma Shi sighed, her look was low-spirited, she said: "That child might have a rash brain, how do we know that what actually he said?"

Feng Wanli said: "The day the fellow disciple got hit and killed by the master, some of the disciples returned from the central plains and informed that the envoys of the Command of reward and punishment are coming to the Ling Xiao city.

When master heard about this matter than he actually laughed and said: "Damn, they will die well!

Feng Wanli said: "I asked master about Lu Shidi. He said: "I asked this boy about who is better at martial art me or the Shaolin School. He said that even after the former leader wondrous truth master is dead after he left for the island of heroes but still the Shaolin Temple is ranked first among the martial art schools. I told him that he was talking nonsense but he said that any school might excel in swordsmanship for a period of time but their move keeps on transforming. However the martial art of Shaolin is actually broad and profound, the seventy-two unique skills all have the profound attainments. Even if in swordsmanship some sect win against Shaolin but in total the martial arts of Shaolin has been accumulated over a period of about thousand of years. Any other sect can't compare itself against them."

Grandma Shi said: "he actually replied correctly. Where did he learn all these things? Even if we consider the sword skills; snow mountain sword skills are not necessarily above other sect's sword skill. What did that old bastard said after that?"

Feng Wanli said: "master-wife, Disciple does not dare to say what happened afterwards."

Grandma Shi got angry: "So this is how you are showing your respect to the

leader of your sect! Fine, when I was not in the Ling Xiao city, how dare you collude with the rebels and disrespected your own master?"

Feng Wanli kneeled down and kowtowed, he said: "Disciple has committed a heinous crime."

Grandma Shi said: "Fine, You all are really the disciples of that old bastard, as they say if you put a flower in the pile of rubbish, still it will stink, you all are same .Each one of you has committed the heinous crime, so than Feng Wanli should die, Bai Wanjian should die, Geng Wanzhong should die, Wang Wanren should die" This way she shouted names of numerous disciples and shouted her judgment. Geng Wanzhong, Wang Wanren and others felt ashamed and lowered their head.

Grandma Shi shouted: "Get up, you stupid and tell me what your master said afterwards?"

Feng Wanli said: "Yes!" and stood up and continued: "Master said: "This boy said that there are good points in both the martial art of our sect and that of Shaolin, he also told me that there might be a really minute difference between the martial art of the sect leader of Shaolin and my martial art skill...damn! Damn! The martial art of "power and virtue gentleman" is unparalleled in the world, moreover even in five millenniums, vertically and horizontally in several thousand miles, through the ages, no one had greater martial art skill as me."

Grandma Shi scolded: "Bah, such a big mouth!"

Feng Wanli said: "We looked when master was saying these words, his mental state looked a bit unstable and he was behaving a little abnormally. He was not his real self. It was good that there were only people from our side at that time so no one else knew about this matter otherwise if these words were heard by others than we only feared that we will be become a laughingstock in the martial art world. At that time everybody looked at each other in blank dismay, no one dared to say anything.

The master got angry and shouted: "Are you all gone mute? Why didn't you speak? My words are not right, is it that?"

He points at Su Shidi to ask: "Wan Hong, tell me, are my words are right?"

That fellow replied: "Master's words are certainly right."

Master again got angry and said: "What is right is right, what is wrong is wrong, it's obvious. I ask you; tell me, how high is my martial art?"

That fellow replied gingerly: "Master, your martial art skills are immeasurably deep, through the ages only master has carried forward the martial art of our sect and taken it to new heights."

The master again threw a fit, he shouted loudly: "According to you the sect already had good martial art before me? You have made a mistake, from the start only you are making a mistake. It is me who has created the martial art of the snow mountain sect. Any founder and ancestors who claim that they founded the snow mountain sect are just deceiving people with nonsense. The founders handed down from generation to generation just some ordinary sword skills and book of illustrations to deal with boxing; everybody has seen that my martial arts are the greatest of all. The Shaolin fellows only obtain enlightenment but still they are inferior to your master in term of intelligence."

Grandma Shi said: "Your master's conceited temper is long-standing, he has swindled this sect for past 30 years, hereafter he has not met someone who exceeds his skills that is why he thinks that his martial arts are best under the heaven, when speaking of Shaolin and Wudang; these famous sects have always worked for the greater good of others and learned knowledge and in fact earned their reputation. They don't run after hollow pride and fame. That old bastard cannot think that his conceited temper is getting more and more fierce, unexpectedly he is even cursing the founding fathers of this sect. That child Wanhong was really characterless, as per the circumstances he actually dared to slander even his ancestors."

Feng Wanli said: "master-wife Shi, you cannot think what happened afterwards; master simply listened to his words and immediately struck him with his palm. The moment he got hit, he was thrown several ten feet and immediately lost his life, he scolded: "He told me that I am perhaps better than those, what does "perhaps" mean?"

Grandma Shi shouted: "You are talking nonsense, old bastard might be confused at that moment but he won't kill his beloved disciple for just saying

"perhaps"!"

Feng Wanli said: "master-wife Shi, Everyone in the sect is grateful to master and owe everything to them, disciple hasn't said anything false and does not dare to fabricate this kind of rumor. At least twenty people were witness to this matter; you can confirm it with them."

Grandma Shi looked at the disciples who have returned from central plain earlier to inform about the envoys of Command of reward and punishment.

The disciples said with one voice: "At that time the situation was really this, Elder brother Feng is not lying."

Grandma Shi shook her head to sigh again and again, she said: "It's really difficult to believe such a matter? Has he gone really crazy?"

Feng Wanli said: "Master was really sick, his mind was not clear."

Grandma Shi said: "Then you should have sent for a doctor to him."

Feng Wanli said: "Disciple and others at that time also think about this but did not dare to decide ourselves. We discussed this matter with several fellow disciples and invited two best physicians Nan Daifu and Dai Daifu to have a look at the master.

Master asked them that why are they here. Both of them did not dare to say the truth. Dai Daifu said that he has heard that master is somewhat out of sorts nowadays; he was in the city for such a long time and never has the opportunity to server master so they want to have a look at his pulse and pay their gratitude.

Master said to them that he is not sick and asked him: "Tell me, through the ages, whose martial art is the best?"

Nan Daifu said: "We have studies about the herbs and medicine together, I am afraid we have no knowledge about the martial arts that we can discuss in front of the "power and virtue gentleman". It's like reading "Xiao Jing" (a Confucian classic treatise giving advice on filial piety) in front of Confucius, wielding a axe in front of Lu Ban (legendary master craftsman, called the father of Chinese carpentry)?"

Master smiled and says: "Showing off your meager skills before an expert, you

might have also said that."

Nan Daifu said: "We have always heard that the Shaolin school from Mount Tai in the north are best in the martial arts world, Their founder Bodhidharma crosses the Yangtze river and founded the Shaolin school, he is considered the greatest of the martial art expert through the ages."

Grandma Shi nodded and said: "This Nan Daifu answered appropriately."

Feng Wanli said: "As soon as Master listened to him, he was greatly agitated and got angry. He said: "That Bodhidharma is a person from western region, India, he is a non-han person. These foreigners are coming from surrounding area to China and are diluting the solemn power and prestige of the country."

Nan Daifu was really terrified, he said: "yes, yes, I am aware of my mistake."

Master then asked Dai Daifu, what you think. Dai Dafu saw with own eyes that Nan Daifu has already made an error, he said: "I have heard a lot about the Wudang sect and its founder Zhang Sanfeng. It is said that his martial arts were divine and he himself created the nei jia techniques which are above the Shaolin school martial arts. As you said, that Bodhidharma was a foreigner and is extremely insignificant, Zhang Sanfeng is considered as the best martial artist throughout the ages."

Grandma Shi said: "Shaolin and Wudang are the two big schools, each of their martial art has its own good points, and one cannot say that martial art of Wudang has exceeded Shaolin but Zhang Sanfeng was a master of great learning and integrity who for several hundred years has shaken the martial arts world, this matter can't be argued."

Feng Wanli said: "Master was sitting on chair, after listening to these words, he stood up and said: "You said Zhang Sanfeng creates the palm skills, what is great about that? For me those are really ordinary and sloppy skills. If we talk about his Nei jia techniques, this move is empty in reality, I only need to make such a dozen of moves and then that's it....the opposite party is hit and defeated as simple as twisting my moustache. Also his Taiji sword skills...it's like "parting the mane of a wild horse", I only need to avoid his one move and then a foot kick and he will be on the ground in next moment. The sword skill of his Wudang sect is more of a primal chaos than some skill, how can it match my snow mountain

sect's swordsmanship?"

The master said these words and at the same time he was gesticulating all the moves simultaneously, the whistling wind because of the palm moves really frightened those two people and their complexion turned pale. Our numerous disciples were looking outside the door and no one dared to go inside.

Master continued demonstrating the moves and asked: "How are my martial art compared to that Buddhist monk Bodhidharma and that ox muzzle Zhang Sanfeng?"

Nan Daifu only said: ` ThisThis"

Dai Daifu said:"We only have knowledge about the medicines and sickness, we cannot comment on martial art skills. As you said the martial art of the "power and virtue gentleman" is perhaps better than the Bodhidharma and Zhang Sanfeng."

Grandma Shi scolded: "He is not even concerned about his face!"

Feng Wanli didn't understand if these words of Grandma Shi were for Dai Daifu or Master Bai.

He said: "Master cursed angrily immediately and said: "I have gesticulated these dozens moves, but you don't trust my words, "perhaps".... You said this word.... It might be as you are saying that I am speaking incorrectly!" As he spoke these words he attacked them with his palm moves and killed them then and there"

Grandma Shi listened to these words and couldn't help to shiver. She looked at the other Snow mountain disciples. She saw that the complexion of them had turned to pale and they didn't dare to look at her. Even their son Bai Wanjian was really ashamed and lowered his head.

She thought: "This sect had followed the tradition of never hurting someone who is paying a visit. Even the third commandment of the sect is 'do not injure a person who is not from martial art world'; the fourth is: 'do not injure innocent'. Leave alone injure, this old bastard has slaughtered his disciples, killed these two doctors again, violated the basic tenet that you don't hurt a visitor at your own home, how can he remain the leader of this again?"

Only listened to Feng Wanli also saying: "Master opened the door immediately after that and looked at us indifferently and said: "Why are you all looking at me with such a strange look? Are you scolding me in your heart of killing the visitors who came to visit me in my home? Who decide that a person coming to pay visit to the Snow mountain sect can't be killed here? What will happen if this thing happens, does the sky falls? It is after all decided by another human, why can't we change these rules? If these stupid people had not come to visit me, than they would not have died. They could have fought with me and snatched the leadership of the sect than they could have refuted my word!"

He points at the Yan Shidi and said: "Seventh child, you tell me. Who is the greatest martial art expert through the ages?"

Yan Shidi was really stubborn in nature, he said: "The disciple did not know!"

The master was angry; he raised his voice and asked: Why don't you know?"

Yan Shidi said: "Master has not taught, therefore I did not know."

The master said: "Is good, I will teach you today, the leader of the snow mountain sect "power and virtue gentleman" is easily the best swordsman in the world through the ages, his internal strength is the best, his skills in the concealed weapons is the best, he is a big hero and chivalrous person, a great master of profound learning and integrity! Now tell me what I have taught you."

Yan Shidi said: The "disciple is stupid and cannot remember such a succession of words!"

The master showed him his palm and shouted angrily: "Did you really not listen to my words?"

Yan Shidi said in a resentful tone: "The disciple remembers this much. The leader of the Snow mountain sect "power and virtue gentleman" is saying that he is the greatest swordsman of all time....."

Master did not wait for him to complete his words and struck his palm on his forehead and shouted: "he added that sect 'power and virtue gentleman' "is saying that"....these three characters, what was his intention? What do you all think? "

When Yan Shidi was struck by his palm, his brain dashed out and he was dead

instantly. The other people all got scared. They all followed the meaning of master and said all at once: "the leader of the snow mountain sect "power and virtue gentleman" is easily the best swordsman in the world through the ages, his internal strength is the best, his skills in the concealed weapons is the best, he is a big hero and chivalrous person, a great master of profound learning and integrity" They all said what master said verbatim and master was happy as he walked away."

"As the matter stood, everybody was angry but did not dare to say anything. On the other day, we conducted a funeral procession for the three fellows and the two doctors.

Master actually came inside the mourning hall and then kicked spirit table of those five dead people. Du Shidi had the courage to go forward to persuade the master to put up the ancestral tablet but he got his legs cut by him.

That night, then seven elders from the sect met to discuss the situation. Everybody saw with their own eyes that the snow mountain sect been disintegrating and everybody felt insecure. They all thought that master's palm can fall anyone of them and they can lose their life for no rhyme or reason. They discussed and came to conclusion that they have no other recourse so they decided to put some anesthetics in master's food secretly. He was unconscious but they actually added the handcuffs and shackles in the hand and foot to keep him in control.

Our act defied our superiors, it was a great sin, we are taking the responsibility of what we have done and will accept whatever master-wife Shi command us to do."

After that he bowed to Grandma Shi and drew back into the crowds.

Grandma Shi stayed in her place and thought for half of the day, she remembered that her husband as a hero but after arriving she listened to his stupid behavior and deeds and could not help as her eyes turned red in rage and tears started to flow copiously.

She fluttered and asked: "What Wanli has spoken cannot be an exaggeration but still it's seems bizarre." As she said these words, the tears were rolling on her cheeks.

The people did not speak. For a long time no one spoke, finally Cheng Zixue said: "Sister-in-law Shi, this is actually the truth. If we deceive you again, won't we be committing one more crime on top of another?"

Grandma Shi said fiercely: "You imprison your sect leader and think that all your fellow disciples are stupid and don't understand anything. You slaughtered innocents, you collaborated with others and seized Wanjian and other disciples who have returned from central plains. Do you really expect me to believe your empty words? It looks this sect has no need of the first generation disciples any more, I will stamp out the source of trouble who have started this violent treachery?"

Qi Zimian said: "Sister-in-law, Little brother did not approve of attacking the sect leader and other fellow disciples. I argued with Liao Shidi intensely, in fact for this reason all this fight started at the first place. I think you have already heard this matter."

Grandma Shi got lost in her thought and now she was not crying any more. She sighed and said: "This is called "it takes two hands to clap", this matter is the way it is....one can't blame anyone inside the family anymore."

After Liao Zili from was injured by Bai Wanjian on his leg, he lost a lot of blood but still standing on the sidelines and not a single person came forward to help him. Actually his disciples were all afraid now that they too will be implicated by association with him and no one came out to help.

Grandma Shi formerly listened to him to advocating strongly that they should kill Bai Zizai and their son and she hated him for that but after Feng Wanli stated the reason, the situation has changed considerably. The reality was that the problem was started by her own husband and she cannot help but felt pity for all these people.

She shouted to the disciples from fourth branch: "You animals, you are watching with own eyes that your own master has experienced a severe wound and unexpectedly you are all standing beside him but not helping him. Do you consider yourself a human or not?"

The disciples from fourth branch immediately rushed forward and wrapped up his leg. Other people felt relieved as if a large stone has been removed from their

heart, they thought: "She has forgiven Liao Zili, our crime was much lighter so we should be safe too."

Some people have taken the key immediately and opened the shackles and handcuffs on Geng Wanzhong, Wang Wanren, Wang Wanyi, Wan Zi and other fellow disciples.

Grandma Shi said: "The mental state of the sect leader was abnormal for a while and his behavior was improper, you should have tried to remonstrate actually but you people went on to defy your superior. This is a big matter; I have investigated this matter and will settle it in future.

Our first step right now is to get the sect leader out and discuss this matter."

As soon as the people listened this, the complexion changed suddenly and everyone thought: "If that devil escapes that prison then everyone's life is in danger."

Various people looked at her but no one dared to make any sound.

Grandma Shi got angry and shouted: "What's wrong? Can you imprison him for a lifetime? Do you people dislike him that much?"

Cheng Zixue said: "Sister-in-law Shi, at present you are the leader of the snow mountain sect, you must not free him immediately. Senior fellow-disciple must be freed but first we must try to cure his sickness otherwiseOtherwise"

Grandma Shi said fiercely: "Otherwise what"

Cheng Zixue said: "Little brother will like to say goodbye to all of you and will like to not show my face to anyone in the sect." As he was saying these words he bowed in front of her and clasped his hand.

Qi Zimian, Liang Zijin also said: "Sister-in-law Shi, you are broad-minded and generous, you have forgiven everybody, we will too like to descend the mountain and will not dare to step into the Ling Xiao city again for the rest of our life."

Grandma Shi thought: "These people fear that the old bastard will come out then will go after them. If everybody will run away then it won't take much time before Ling Xiao city will become an empty city. What will then happen to the Snow mountain sect?"

She said: "Good! There is no hurry for a while; I will take a look at him first, if he does not behave properly than we will not free him."

They all looked at each other for a while and thought: "You husband and wife will be good to each other, you will be partial towards him anyway. If she has to free that old lunatic than why don't we run away?"

Grandma Shi said: "Jian'er, A'Xiu!" She approached Shi Potian and said: "Yidao, you three come with me."

She said to Cheng Zixue and other fellow disciples: "Please lead me and these three people to that prison where that old bastard is kept. You all can listen to what I am talking to him and so can be assured that I am not plotting against anyone or am biased towards anyone."

Cheng Zixue said: "How can it be possible....little brother did not dare, won't it be really oversensitive?" Even though he said these words he led those people towards the prison. It was actually a matter of life and death. Qi Zimian and Liang Zijin followed them, Liao Zili too pouted at his disciples, and so all people followed them to that place.

The line of people crossed the hall and moved in towards the prison and after some time they all reached the place where Shi Potian was originally imprisoned. Cheng Zixue arrived towards them and said: "In here! We are using this place as a prison for several generations."

Shi Potian had already suspected that the person he tried to free was in fact the old master Bai and when they reached that place, he was sure by now that he guessed correctly.

A disciple took out the key and went to the gate of prison to open the lock however he was shocked by the knowledge that the iron lock was already unlocked.

He got frightens and had a ghastly pale look on his face, he thought: "Iron lock is open; this means that the old lunatic has came out." Both of his hands started trembling and he unexpectedly did not dare to push open the gate.

Grandma Shi made an effort to push and the gate opened smoothly. Suddenly as if by prior agreement, Qi Zimian, Liang Zijin and Cheng Zixue, these three

people withdraw several steps. As they went inside and looked at the door of the second room where Bai Zizai was imprisoned; that disciple called out: "This looks bad! The gate was unlocked.....it looks he has run!"

As he said these words, he remembered that Grandma Shi was standing next to him and shut up. His hand was trembling and he didn't dare to open the door of that room, his keys made a loud clattering sound.

Shi Potian wanted to say to him: "This gate was left open by me only but he was acting as a mute for such a long time that he could force him to say these words.

Grandma Shi snatched the key, inserted it in the keyhole and turned it. She detected that the lock was already open. As she moved to open the door, she was really anxious at this moment. She cannot help but to think that: "He is mentally unstable at the moment, if he has run away to the Ling Xiao city then what a big catastrophe would that be." As he she pushed the door, she couldn't restrain her hands from trembling.

The door only opened several inches and they all heard an old man laughing out aloud.

The people sighed in great relief. They all heard old master Bai laughing wildly and saying loudly: "What good are the Shaolin School and Wudang sect? All of them are breaking wind and doing nothing at all? Starting today, in the martial arts world, everybody must study the martial art of the snow mountain sect. All the other schools must be shut and closed. Did everybody hear? All over the world, as the official look for the emperor, the scholar look for Confucius, martial art experts will look at "power and virtue gentleman". Whoever refuses to accept, I will crush his head."

Grandma Shi shoved open the door several inches, in the dim glimmer, she saw only the handcuffs and shackles on the hands and legs of her husband. His whole body was circled with another shackle and he was tied up between two giant stone columns. She couldn't help but felt a sickening feeling in her heart.

Bai Zizai looked at his wife, stayed dull for a moment and then said with a smile immediately: "Is very good, is very good! You have come back. Now in the martial arts world everybody will revere me, the snow mountain sect will rule the world,

we will close all the other various sects and schools. Shi, are you all right?"

Grandma Shi sighed and tried to calm down and said: "It is good! But how will various sects and school will be shut down?"

Bai Zizai said with a smile: "You are not able to understand. The martial art of the snow mountain sect the highest, no sects and school can stand in front of us so naturally they will be shut down."

Grandma Shi pulled A'Xiu in front of him and said: "You look, who has come back?"

She knew the her husband doted on this little granddaughter, this mental state was unstable and abnormal, when A'Xiu fell of the cliff, he was quite disturbed and all this problem might be triggered by that incident only so she thought that perhaps he might convalesce once he sees that his granddaughter is safe.

A'Xiu called out: "Grandfather, I have come back, I have not died, I fell in to the mountain valley in the snow but I was fortunate enough that Grandmother found me and rescued me."

Bai Zizai felt comfortable as he looked at her and said: "Is very good, you are A'Xiu. You have not died; the grandfather likes you very much. A'Xiu, you are clever, now tell me, whose martial art is best in the world?"

A'Xiu said in a low voice: "It is the grandfather!"

Bai Zizai laughed and said: "A'Xiu, you are a really clever girl!"

Bai Wanjian rushed ahead two steps and said: "Father, the child came late and seized by these villains. Let the child unlock you."

Cheng Zixue and others were standing close to the gate, their face turned ashen, they only waited for Bai Wanjian to go forward to unlock and everybody planned to then turn and run away.

They actually heard Bai Zizai shouting: "Unlock me! Who wants you to unlock? These handcuffs and shackles, in your father's eye, are nothing but rotten wood and mud. I only need to shake my hand gently and can break them. I do not want to that now. I like to sit and meditate with my eyes shut. In this entire world; vertically and horizontally in several thousand miles, even if several thousand

people together come, still they won't be able to injure your father's hair, how can some people lock me?"

Bai Wanjian said: "Yes, the father is unmatched in the world, nobody can certainly harm you father. This moment mother and A'Xiu have returned, it's a big family reunion, I humbly ask father to come and to the hall and drink with us." As he said these words, he took the keys and move towards him to unlock the handcuffs.

Bai Zizai got angry: "I tell you to walk, than you walk! I have worn these metallic shackles, it's actually really interesting, and you think I can't open them? Get away quickly!"

Bai Wanjian was startled and as he drew back two steps, the key fell on the ground. He knew by watching the face of his father that he was not fine. On the other hand he can understand the distress of the fellow disciples if he got freed so he faked his shock and let the key fall.

Cheng Zixue and others heard it and cannot restrain to look around and came inside to steal a glance.

Bai Zizai shouted: "You saw me, why don't you pay your respect? The one in front of you is the greatest hero of all time?"

They all thought: "He is tied up at this moment on the stone column, from this distance we don't need to fear him, but Madam Shi will free him eventually, what's wrong in flattering someone, it might save our life in future."

They bowed and said: "the leader of the snow mountain sect "power and virtue gentleman" is easily the best swordsman in the world through the ages, his internal strength is the best, his skills in the concealed weapons is the best, he is a big hero and chivalrous person, a great master of profound learning and integrity."

Liang Zijin then said hurriedly: "Old master Bai is the great leader of the Snow mountain sect. All these Shaolin, Wudang, Emei and Qingcheng and several random school and sects should be closed down. All over the world, only master Bai should be revered alone." Other people too got encouraged and started flattering.

Bai Zizai was self-satisfied, he nodded and smiled.

Grandma Shi really felt ashamed, she thought: "This old man has really gone crazy; but it might not be necessarily true. He saw that me and A'Xiu and recognized us clearly, it's really bad situation, how do we cure him?"

Bai Zizai turned towards her suddenly, he asked Grandma Shi said: "That fellow Ding Busi had come to visit me and said that you arrived at Azure Conch Mountain to visit him and was lingering with him together for several days, what is this matter?"

Grandma Shi got angry: "You have gone crazy, how can you believe this nonsense?"

A'Xiu too said: "Grandfather, that Ding Busi really compelled grandmother to go to his Azure conch mountain and he tried to take advantage of our precarious position but grandmother rather threw herself in the river to commit suicide but did not went with him."

Bai Zizai smiled and said: "Is very good, is very good, I know her, how can she receive this shame? Afterward how did you manage to escape?"

A'Xiu said: "Afterward, afterward" She pointed to Shi Potian and said: "Luckily this elder brother was there and we got rid of him and escaped Ding Busi."

Bai Zizai casted a sidelong glance to Shi Potian, in the room the light was not enough so he didn't recognized him as Shi ZhongYu but knew that he was the same person who tried to rescue him sometime back, in his heart he had a favorable impression for this young fellow and nodded to say: "This boy is not bad. Although compared to me or even my son, he not that good but he managed to expel Ding Busi, this is not bad."

Grandma Shi was now driven beyond the limits of forbearance, she said loudly: "You really blow your trumpet? You are talking nonsense for such a long time now, the martial art of the snow mountain sect is the best under the sun, what kind of bullshit is that. This child is my disciple; he is better than your disciples."

Bai Zizai laughed, he said: "Absurd, absurd! What ability do you have to be able to exceed mine?"

Grandma Shi said: "I have taught my disciple sword skills; you also taught your disciple your sect's sword skills. My sword skills are better than your sword skill. Son, tell your master, whose sword skill is better and whose martial art skill is strongest?"

Bai Wanjian said: "ThisThis" he was really influenced by the power and reputation of his father for such long period; he did not dare to complete his sentence.

Bai Zizai said with a smile: "he is your disciple, how could he be match to my disciple? In sword skills, tell me your mother is talking nonsense?"

Bai Wanjian had a simple and straight personality, if he won then he won, if he lost then lost, he was defeated by Shi Potian so how could he not admit it?

He said: "Child is incompetent, I compared my skills with this boy just now, and he really won."

Bai Zizai jumped suddenly but got pulled by the shackles back; he pulled the shackled with great strength and called out: "Nonsense, this is absurd! It's doesn't matter?"

Grandma Shi and Bai Zizai have lived together for several dozens years as husband and wife. Grandma Shi understood what he was thinking right now at this moment, she thought in her heart: "Old bastard thinks that his martial art is unmatched in the world, he was living in this Ling Xiao city as a king for such a long time, and something triggered his megalomaniac nature after his fight with Ding brothers; As the saying goes: 'Worrying about a problem doesn't solve it'. We need to ease his mind and give him some medicine. At first we have to force him to accept that he is not the best martial art expert then only we can go further and persuade him to take any medicine.

It's only a pity that Zhang San and Li Si have gone, otherwise I might have asked them to treat this insanity and give him some kind of medicine suited to this illness. I think I have to ask my disciple to compare his martial arts with him, although his martial art skills are not that high but his internal energy is very strong and he can actually defeat this old bastard. I have also to persuade this old bastard to fight first."

She said: "Just boasting that you are superior to everyone in any form of the

martial art skills through the ages is really a big talk. I think the internal energy of my disciple is better than you."

Bai Zizai looked upwards and laughed wildly, he said: "Then the Bodhidharma and Zhang Sanfeng have come back to life, this child is no match for "power and virtue gentleman". This child is yet wet behind the ears, with his baby face and such a young age, I only need to use about 30 percent of my internal energy and he will be sufficiently overawed."

Grandma Shi sneered and said: "Nonsense...are you not ashamed of mocking other person. Fine...compare your internal energy with this boy and we will see the truth."

Bai Zizai said with a smile: "This boy is no match to even stand in front of me...I will just use a hand and he will be somersaulting in the air."

Grandma Shi knew that her husband has very good martial art skills, she was afraid that he can seriously injure Shi Potian in this competition and can even take his life so she said these words very earnestly: "This young boy is my disciple, he is also getting married to A'Xiu so just remember that he is going to be your beloved granddaughter's husband. You compare your skills by all means but don't try to injure anyone."

Bai Zizai said with a smile: "Does he want to be my granddaughter's husband? That will be a good match. Good, I will not injure him or take his life then."

Suddenly they heard the footsteps sound of a person arriving at the outside of the stone prison in a hurry, he said aloud: "reporting to the sect leader, The sect leader of the Clan of the eternal happiness Shi Potian and 'Skyscraping Resident' Xie Yanke has rescue the Shi Qing couple and are challenging us in the big hall." The person was actually Geng Wanzhong.

Bai Wanjian and Grandma Shi both make a startled sound as if by prior agreement and said: "Is it 'Skyscraping Resident' Xie Yanke?"

Shi Potian learned that Mr. and Mrs. Shi Qing are well, escaped the dangerous situation, he felt really relived but he listened that Shi Potian has arrived with Xie Yanke and got a bit confused. He assumed that in that was Shi ZhongYu has actually come himself with Xie Yanke. He thought: "this is good; I haven't seen Grandfather for so many days."

Grandma Shi said: "We don't have any friendship or enmity with either Xie Yanke or the clan of eternal happiness, and then what is this matter all about? Are they helping the Shi Qing couple?"

Geng Wanzhong said: "That Shi Potian was quite impolite, he looked at the Ling Xiao city and said that he wanted to kill us all.....we can't escape."

Bai Zizai got angry: "What is this nonsense! What thing is the clan of the eternal happiness? What thing is that Shi Potian? How many people does clan of eternal happiness have?"

Geng Wanzhong said: "They are only five people, besides the Shi Qing couple, Xie Yanke and Shi Potian, there is a young girl; She said that she was the granddaughter of Ding Busan."

Shi Potian heard Ding Dang has also to arrived, he wrinkled his brows and looked at A'Xiu, he only saw her stare at him with her wonderful set of eyes. His complexion turned red and he thought: "She asked me to pretend as Shi ZhongYu but it's good that she has rescued the Shi couple. Why is Shi ZhongYu pretending as Shi Potian? Did she deliberately wanted to keep me in suspense and perhaps decided to come to Ling Xiao city later with Xie Yanke and rescue us all."

Bai Zizai said: "Only five people, what they can do? You had had not said to him that: "the leader of the snow mountain sect "power and virtue gentleman" is easily the best swordsman in the world through the ages, his internal strength is the best, his skills in the concealed weapons is the best, he is a big hero and chivalrous person, a great master of profound learning and integrity."

Geng Wanzhong said: "ThisThisHe is a person from the martial arts world; certainly he is aware of the reputation of the master."

Bai Zizai said: "Yes, this may be wonderful! Both know my reputation, how dare they arrive to the Ling Xiao city and cause trouble? Yes! I am hiding in this small stone chamber to evade vulgar event spread over the world. They think that old master Bai has lost interest in the worldly affairs and have washed his hands pf sect matters so they visiting the city to bully us. Heh... Heh! You look, your master is like a big tree, if I don't provide you shade than be ready to suffer."

Grandma Shi gets angry: "You are such piece of work! Everybody come with me and let's have a look at them." As she said these words, she moved outside the door and Bai Wanjian, Cheng Zixue and others followed her.

Shi Potian was just about to follow her, suddenly Bai Zizai called out: "Boy, you stay here, I will teach you."

Shi Potian paused and turned around. A'Xiu too had walked to the door but she got concerned about Shi Potian's safety and immediately came back. She thought that grandfather is half-crazy and not mentally stable. If he compete with the Shi Potian on internal energy, she feared that he might kill him. She knew that her own skills were not good enough to save Shi Potian if he gets in a critical situation so she called out: "Grandmother, do grandfather must reallycompete with him!"

Grandma Shi turned her head and said: "Listen, if you injure my disciple or take his life then I will go to the Azure conch mountain and will not come back for a lifetime."

Bai Zizai called out in anger: "YouWhat words are you speaking?"

Grandma Shi does not pay any attention, and moved out in a swagger and knocked the door on her way out. The prison room immediately went dark.

A'Xiu bent and picked up the key for the foot shackles and handcuff and opened them. She said: "Grandfather, you teach him some moves but please remember that he has not practiced a lot and his ability is pretty ordinary."

Bai Zizai was greatly happy, he said with a smile: "Good, I only need to teach him some moves but he will benefit from them for the rest of his life."

Shi Potian had heard Bai Zizai saying that he has the best internal energy throughout age; he is the best swordsman ever and so on...Now he himself said that he is going to teach him some martial art skills and so he hurriedly said "Many thanks old master for pointers."

Bai Zizai said with a smile: "Is very good, I will teach you several moves of shallowest type, if I teach you the profound skills then I'm afraid that you won't be able to comprehend."

A'Xiu moved back to the door and opened the door, the room again filled with

bright light. Shi Potian saw Bai Zizai standing comfortably now, his high head and his composure and overwhelming personality dwarfing him. He looked like a deity and couldn't restrain himself from getting afraid and drew back two steps.

Bai Zizai said with a smile: "No need to fear...you don't have to be afraid, grandfather will not injure you. Now look, if I put out a hand to seize by your scruff and then squeeze your muscles" As he said these words his right hand moved to really seize Shi Potian by his scruff.

This move was both quick and the position was also wonderful, how could have Shi Potian evaded this attack did, his hand strength was disproportionately large, as soon as he grasped him, Bai Zizai wanted to throw him in the air but Shi Potian hurriedly concentrated his internal strength and stood firm, and wielded his right arm to attack his arm.

Bai Zizai held his scruff and thought that he had succeeded in his first move but couldn't believe that Shi Potian was still holding the ground and he didn't manage to throw him. Suddenly Shi Potian attacked with his right arm and the right arm of Bai Zizai went numb and was severely aching as if thousands of pins have been pierced and he let loose his scruff.

He thought: "This boy's internal energy is really strong." He tried to attack with his left hand and attacked at his chest.

This time Shi Potian was alert and fended his attack and admired his skills and said: "Old master, these two moves were not much fiercer than that of Grandpa Ding Busi.

Bai Zizai was already secretly ashamed, but when he listened to him saying that his moves very not much fiercer than Ding Busi, he got excited and said: "Ding Busi, he isn't much of an opponent?" he made a move to trip Shi Potian. Shi Potian moved like a flash and avoided his attack and did not stumble at all.

These three moves of Bai Zizai "yi jiu, yi zhua, yi ban" (to clutch, to grab, to trip) were known as "God tripping the ghost to fall in three steps". Actually this was a unique move created by Bai Zizai himself. For dozens of years, many famous masters have fallen against this move of his. However when these three moves came across vigorous internal strength of Shi Potian even one was not as effective unexpectedly.

That day he and Ding brothers met, Ding Busi claimed that Grandma Shi have arrived at the Azure conch mountain and stayed there for several days. He got jealous and extremely angry. From that day onwards his mental state became a bit abnormal but today after seeing that she has returned, he knew that the story of her going to Azure Conch Mountains was fabricated. He also saw A'Xiu and was in his heart was really happy and his mental state stabilized a lot but he always believed that his "marital art is the first under heaven" and he was still firm on this belief.

At this moment after his series of three moves cannot throw down this youth unexpectedly, his anger rose and his gain went mad. He shouted and attacked with his palm at his chest with about 30%-40% of his internal strength.

Shi Potian understood from the palm wind that this attack is really fierce and he moved his left hand to obstruct his attack. Bai Zizai comfortably avoided his arm and attacked on the other side. Shi Potian moved sideways to evade but Bai Zizai's fist was coming with great speed and with a large sound the fist connected his right shoulder.

A'Xiu called out in alarm. Shi Potian comforted her and said: "No need to get worried; I am not hurt."

Bai Zizai got angry: "Young fellow, it isn't that painful? Fine.... take one more of my fist again." This fist attack was intercepted by Shi Potian.

Bai Wanjian was pretty comfortable and executed four moves consecutively; finally the fourth attack got him and he got hit on his left hip by his kick.

A'Xiu saw that the fight was getting more and more quick. Bai Zizai was attacking unceasingly with his fists and kicks. Shi Potian managed to keep off about half of the attacks only. Initially she was very worried, she called out: "Grandfather, show mercy!" But she saw that the complexion of Shi Potian was really gentle and he didn't look in any pain.

Bai Zizai kept on hitting Shi Potian continually or several moves, initially he remembered his wife's word so only applied about 30%-40% of his strength for fear that he might get injured but after some time, no matter how he hit him with his palm or fist or kicked him, Shi Potian calmly withstood.

Bai Zizai was startled and at the same time extremely angry, he wanted to

finish this fight quickly but things were getting strange. He gradually kept on increasing his internal strength with each of his move but he was unable to strike down the opposite party. He roared and put down the entire strength of his body in the attack and attacked repeatedly. Instantly, he caught one of the chains attached from the stone column and it hit the door and the door shut close.

As the fight progressed A'Xiu found it pretty difficult to breathe and experience unendurable pain and could not manage to stand inside the room so she came out of the room. She saw with own eyes that her grandfather was hitting Shi Potian with his fist with incomprehensible power and could not endure to look. The last event she saw was a chain hitting the door and the door shutting close.

She was extremely worries and secretly prayed: "God please bless us, do not let any of them get hurt in this fight, it should better if there is no victory or defeat and both of them give up."

She only noticed after a moment that only after the door got close, the sound coming from inside was getting more and more loud, her brain was somewhat dizzy, it seemed that the ground underneath her was also somewhat shaking. However suddenly the sound stopped and she couldn't hear a single thing.

A'Xiu put her ear on the orifice of the door to listen but unexpectedly there was not a least bit of sound. This silence after such a tumult and earth-shaking fighting was really eerie. She was panic-stricken and thought in her heart: "If grandfather won, than he will be surely complacent and would have been laughing. If Shi Lang triumphs, he will definitely come out of the door and call me but how is there no sound at all? Did someone get severely injured? Is it possible that both people used up all their strength and end up dead?"

She shivered at this thought and put out a hand to shove open the door slowly, she closed her eyes tightly and did not dare to look at the situation, for fear that when she open eyes she will see the corpses of both people lying horizontally or both people spitting blood and dead. After some moment she couldn't restrain herself and opened one of her eye and saw Bai Zizai and Shi Potian both of them sitting on the ground. Bai Zizai had his eyes shut and Shi Potian actually turned towards her with a smile on hid face.

A'Xiu sighed and opened both eyes and saw clearly that Shi Potian had stretched out his right palm on the back of the Bai Zizai and was helping him to cure his wound.

A'Xiu called out: "GrandfatherIs he injured?"

Shi Potian said: "He is not injured. He just had some problems with his breathing; he will be fine in a moment!"

A'Xiu put her right hand to caress her chest as if calming her heart which was thumping wildly and said: "Thank God....."

Suddenly, Bai Zizai leapt from his place and shouted in a loud voice: "I have trouble in breathing? Whatwhat kind of nonsense is this?" He extended his palm to shoot down at the top of the head of Shi Potian but felt a fierce pain in his palm which was difficult to bear; he raised his palm and looked at it. He saw that his palms have swollen to double of its size and was almost red and purple. He feared that if he hit Shi Potian once again then his palm will burst first.

He at once thought about the fight with Shi Potian and understood that the internal energy of this boy is simply incredible. Actually it's unthinkable, he recalled his dozens of moves in which his fist and palm attacks were simply bouncing off his body as if each of his moves were striking a stone wall. The opposite party has not been injured but his own palm actually could not endure, as he thought suddenly he also felt extreme pain in his both feet to as if millions of pins have been poked unceasingly, as he remembered that he kicked him several times too but instead his own feet got injured

He looked dumbly for half of the day and said: "Ahh! I always thought that my "internal energy was the best through the ages" and so on, the reality is that I was talking nonsense." He took up the foot shackles and handcuffs and set them on his own hand and foot and got chained again.

A'Xiu was startled and said: "Grandfather, what is this?"

Bai Zizai turned his body towards the cliff and in a low-spirited voice: "I was arrogant and conceited about my skills, this is a grave sin, I will face this wall to think of my faults here. You two go out quickly, I henceforth don't want to see anyone else. You call on your grandmother and ask her to go to Azure Conch Mountain and never return to the Ling Xiao city"

A'Xiu and Shi Potian looked at each other in blank dismay; they did not know what to do.

After a long period of time, A'Xiu complained: "You are not good, why do you have to flaunt your superiority?"

Shi Potian said in consternation: "II did not, my fists were not projected at your grandfather."

A'Xiu said: "What do mean by "your" grandfather? You won't be disgraced or something if call him "Grandfather".

Shi Potian understood her intention and called out sweetly in a low voice: "Grandfather!"

Bai Zizai waved his hands and said: "Go way quickly, go away! You....I have been your grandson, you are my grandfather!"

A'Xiu extended her tongue, smiled and said: "Grandfather is angry, come let us tell grandmother about it."

Chapter 18 - A Request

A'Xiu and Shi Potian came out of that stone prison and moved towards the hall.

Shi Potian asked: "A'Xiu, Everybody saw me and said that I am that Shi ZhongYu. Even Master Shi Qing and Madame Shi cannot distinguish between us but you actually haven't admitted your mistakes?"

The face of A'Xiu suddenly whitened and she stopped at the same place. At this time both people were walking on a garden trail, A'Xiu puts out a hand to hold the a tree, the complexion of her face turned pale. She calmed down and said: "That Shi ZhongYu once tried to bully me, I was mad and threw myself down the cliff to commit suicide. Eldest brother, you actually took his place and came here. You have to kill him"

Shi Potian hesitated and said: "He is the beloved son of the Shi Qing couple and their only son; Master Shi Qing and Madam Shi were extremely good to me, I II can't kill their son."

A'Xiu lowered her face, two lines of tears ran down her cheeks and she sobbed: "This is the first time I am asking you something and you do not consentYou will also certainly bully me as my grandfather treats my grandmother. II will go and tell grandmother and mother about this matter." As she said these words she covered her face and rushed ahead.

Shi Potian said: "A'Xiu.... A'Xiu..., listen my words."

A'Xiu sobbed and said: "If you do not kill him, I will forever ignore you." She didn't stop and ran towards the hall.

Shi Potian too followed her in to the hall. He only saw that bright sword light was flashing in the hall, four people were fighting vigorously. He recognized that Bai Wanjian and three more people were fighting. He immediately noticed that actually three people with long swords in their hand were fighting together with a short old man in blue gown.

The moment he recognized the old man he called out: "Grandpa, how are you, I often think about you." This old man was the Skyscraping resident Xie Yanke.

Xie Yanke was right now besieged by three senior masters of the snow mountain sect and he was holding the three long swords without any weapons. Suddenly he heard Shi Potian calling and raised his eyes to look to him and cannot restrain himself to get shocked and called out: "What's wrong.....How come there are two of them?"

When master fight then the result is often decided by a single mistake, how could one take his mind off and divert his attention? Xie Yanke getting startled was a no small matter, the momentum changed suddenly and the Snow mountain disciples got the opportunity. The three long swords immediately moved to seize the opportunity to stab his lower abdomen. All the three people executed a move called "racing camel and fine steed", the sword speed was quick and also ruthless and they saw with their own eyes that the sword point has bumped into his blue gown.

Shi Potian shouted: "Careful!" The moment he saw them starting their move Shi Potian shouted and leapt to hold Bai Wanjian by his left shoulder and stiffly pulled him backward for several steps.

He suddenly heard two clank sounds as Xie Yanke put forth his unique skill 'Green Needles Clean-Palm Technique' in the emergency. He waited for the two swords to come together and then with his right palm attacked the swords.

Although his palm strike was quick but his blue gown has been cut in to two from the front by those two swords. He turned over his palm and went on an all out attack on those two people. In a moment both of them were flying in the air non-stop and collided with the wall of the hall. The intensity was such that the roof of the hall shook and some thin bamboo started to fall resembling like a sudden downpour. Suddenly Xie Yanke heard a patting sound as Shi Potian let go Bai Wanjian's shoulder; Bai Wanjian has actually hit him on his face backhandedly.

Xie Yanke looked at Shi Potian and then looked at Shi ZhongYu sitting at the corner and then again at Shi Potian. He was still surprised and could not decide, he said: "YouYou two people are entirely alike?"

Shi Potian was really happy and he said with extreme happiness on his face: "Grandpa, are you here to rescue me? Many thanks to you! I am fine, they have

not killed me. Dingdang, Brother Shi, you also have come. Master Shi Qing and Madame Shi, you are not injured, I am extremely relieved! Master, grandfather have put on the foot shackles and handcuffs and is not willing to come out, he wants you to go to Azure Conch Mountain."

In a moment, he was thanking Xie Yanke, then he spoke to Shi ZhongYu the next moment he spoke to Shi Qing and then relayed Bai Zizai's words to Grandma Shi. He said all these words jubilantly; people were really surprised to listen him speaking to so many people at the same time.

Xie Yanke was practicing 'Green Needles Clean-Palm Technique' on the skyscraping cliff on the day when Bei Haishi arrived. He was actually trying to test the extent of his internal strength so he used up all his internal strength. In the meantime Bei Haishi came to the skyscraping cliff with eight skilled people. He said that he wanted to meet the leader of the Clan of eternal happiness. Xie Yanke refuted that he has any knowledge of the whereabouts of their sect leader and engaged in fight with Bei Haishi. However Xie Yanke had already exhausted his internal energy so couldn't manage to win and instead withdrew back.

Although he retreated but one cannot say that he got defeated but he was bullied away from his sky scrapping cliff by these people. It was actually a great lifetime shame for him personally. He had exhausted his internal energy so there was no way he could have defeated Bei Haishi let alone the other martial art experts from clan of eternal happiness so he left the sky scrapping cliff.

However after careful consideration, he decided to perfect his 'Green Needles Clean-Palm Technique' and then only wanted to go to clan of eternal happiness. He thought that a true man can wait ten year for revenge and shouldn't act on impulse therefore he went out-of-the-way and spent several month on practicing 'Green Needles Clean-Palm Technique'. After that he went to Zhenjiang and arrived at the clan of eternal happiness. He injured four of the disciples standing as guard and called the sect leader to see him.

In the meantime after Dingdang deceived Shi Potian and exchanged him with Shi ZhongYu, they wanted to go to some faraway place but unexpectedly clan of eternal happiness has people everywhere to look for their sect leader. In less than half day, they met some of them and were forced to go back.

Bei Haishi and others hereafter monitored his every movement really tightly, they thought that this boy at that time in front of those envoys spoke big words but now he is frightened and don't want to go to island of heroes and might try to escape.

Dozens of people were always on guard and did not leave him out of sight day or night, no matter how crafty Shi ZhongYu was he was not able to sneak off again. Shi ZhongYu somehow managed to escape the disaster of Ling Xiao city but again he was trapped and now might have to go to island of heroes. Needless to say that he was quite worried.

He discussed this matter with Dingdang several times. The two people agreed that he can't go to the island of the heroes in any case but it also has been hard to sneak off from the sect without drawing any attention.

For the time being Shi ZhongYu pretended to be Shi Potian. He was a quick-witted person but several people knew him well in the sect and he feared that they might recognize him eventually. However it might have been difficult for Shi Potian to disguise and pretend as Shi ZhongYu but it was actually hundred times easier for Shi ZhongYu to pretend as Shi Potian. He has a guilty conscience after all, so he did not dare to behave haughtily like in the past and hid every day in the room and fooled around with Dingdang.

When some people came to ask his help about important matters, he will simply say yes...yes and ignored giving some suggestions.

The people from clan of eternal happiness only wanted this person to keep his appointment with the envoys of island of heroes and were glad that he is paying no attention and acted as they seem fit.

When Bei Haishi first went to skyscraping cliff to meet sect leader that day, he fought with Xie Yanke for three moves. Although he was worried in his heart but after fighting three moves he thought that the internal energy of this person is pretty average and the reputation he enjoys in this martial art world is actually incompatible, so he didn't thought much about him afterwards. After that once he detected that Shi Potian is by no means Shi ZhongYu, as the matter stood, he has truly offended a master from the martial arts world for no reason at all and he felt really bad under his heart and had a feeling of compunction, but the

invitation from the island of heroes was imminent and the sect didn't had a leader so they have to do something.

Shi Potian was suffering from Yin and Yang energy streams and was getting unconscious every now and then so he took him with him and brought back to the clan of eternal happiness.

Earlier when Shi ZhongYu initially became the sect leader with the help of Bei Haishi by defeating Situ Bangzhu and forcing him to leave the sect in humiliation, he actually tried to run away after several days but was seized by Bei Haishi. Shi ZhongYu was imprisoned stark naked for several days to teach him a lesson that he can't run away. However Shi ZhongYu eventually managed to escape again and hide in a brothel. Bei Haishi had suffered a great internal injury in his young days so he accumulated vast amount of medicinal and injury related knowledge so although he was not a physician but still he was called Physician Bei.

He actually saw the scars on the body of Shi ZhongYu in the prison so he imitated those on the body of Shi Potian when he was unconscious; one on his shoulder, one on his buttocks and another on his leg, they were not only alike but were in fact flawless. When Dingdang, his personal enemy Bai Wanjian, even the Shi Qing couple saw that; they couldn't recognize.

Bei Haishi only needed Shi Potian until the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month and after that he himself would have taken the command of the sect. Actually the appearance of Shi Potian and Shi ZhongYu was similar but there were big differences between these two people but after looking at these scars fabricated by Bei Haishi, these scars had a long lasting impression on their heart.

Still some people had doubt that Shi ZhongYu was such a suave person but this person is such a simpleton but the story of the serious illness and Shi Potian losing his memory was plausible enough to convince that Shi Potian was indeed the sect leader. It's actually human nature that they believe something if they really want to...Ding dang wanted her as her lover, Shi Qing couple found their beloved son in him and Bai Wanjian his arch enemy.

It was such a shock for Bei Haishi that the two envoys of "Command of reward and punishment" actually managed to search Shi ZhongYu in a Yangzhou brothel and unexpectedly brought him back. All the scheming and plotting of Bei Haishi

was suddenly in public. Although Shi Potian continued as the sect leader of the clan of eternal happiness and saved them from disaster, Bei Haishi didn't come out with the truth and totally avoided the conversation about his involvement in this matter. So even though this matter of exchanging Shi Potian with Shi ZhongYu was hard to hide but the truth was not actually exposed.

That day Xie Yanke came to clan of eternal happiness to challenge them. Bei Haishi heard that he has already injured four of the guards. He thought that he shouldn't be afraid fighting with this person and left the hall to meet him but also dispatched a person to inform sect leader about him.

Shi ZhongYu kept on refusing to come out and meet the challenge of Xie Yanke. Numerous disciples came one after another to give him the news and invite him.

One person said: "Master Bei and that person surnamed Xie are fighting a very fierce battle in the hall. Bangzhu, please come out and help him quickly!"

Another one said: "Master Bei has been hit on his shoulder by Xie Yanke and his left arm is not working."

"Master Bei tore off the sleeves but Xie Yanke actually seized the opportunity to hit his chest with his palm."

"Master Bei is coughing again and again; he is spurting blood from his mouth, if Bangzhu don't help him then master Bei will lose his life."

"That person surnamed Xie is boasting that if the sect leader doesn't come out now then he will set fire and burn down the entire place!"

In the meantime Shi ZhongYu thought: "If he burns the clan of eternal happiness then what more can I wish, it will be better if this person surnamed Xie butchers all of you." But he was now in front of several people and they were all urging him to come out.

He couldn't dodge that many people so eventually he braced himself and came out with numerous skilled people close to him. He thought that if he died then at first all these people should die.

Xie Yanke was surprised to see him and immediately called out: "Gouzazhong ...is it you."

Shi ZhongYu saw Bei Haishi severely injured, lying wearily nearby in his own pool of blood. When he saw the blood, he got frightened and said: "Everybody; be ready to fight, no one will retreat!" he was frightened but still managed to utter gingerly: "Come on master Xie."

Xie Yanke sneered and said: "Is very good, is very good! This boy has suddenly emerged as the Bangzhu of the clan of eternal happiness!"

However he couldn't restrain his heart and thought all sorts of frightening circumstances this boy can lead him to. He sighed and thought in his heart with great disappointment: "this is really bad, really bad! This physician Bei and this Gouzazhong are both shrewd schemer. I had already taken the oath in the past that whoever will return the black steel symbol, I will fulfill his one verbal command, no matter what."

He actually received one symbol from this Gouzazhong and arrived on the skyscraping cliff and lived with him. He never expected that this person will end up as the leader of the clan of eternal happiness. He thought that perhaps he will ask something which is helpful for his clan. Xie Yanke cursed himself: "you think you were really wise, coming directly to this place and unexpectedly walked into a trap."

If one person reads too much in an incident, then no matter what kind of incident it is he will think that he is going to be implicated and cannot restrain himself from worrying about it. A prisoner escapes from prison, he will find that everyone is just looking at him and someone will come out and try to apprehend him. Even if he sees a Taoist priest who has forsaken the worldly matters still he will think that he has recognized him and will try to get him arrested. If a young man and woman are deeply in love, only if someone says an innocuous word but the other person misunderstands it and think about it then they will find numerous other reason to suspect.

Although a person is extremely intelligent, still this is unavoidable. Xie Yanke never forgot that he made a grave mistake by giving out those three black steel symbols and vowing to fulfill any command for each symbol, in the meantime he was a really moody person. When he looked at Bei Haishi icily staring at Shi ZhongYu he feared that they are in collaboration and could not manage to restrain himself and thought: "If he wants me to break both my hands than I will

become a half-dead disabled person, how will it be good?" He imagined himself without his hands and cannot help but slightly shivered.

If he turned around and run away from the clan of eternal happiness and this Gouzazhong immediately then they won't be able to catch up with him henceforth he just have to make sure that he never comes across this Gouzazhong. It might not be difficult to evade him but after this incident his reputation in the martial art world will be tarnished forever. He cursed on the day when he gave out those black steel symbols and vowed.

Who would have thought that Shi ZhongYu too was terrified in his heart but when he saw that strange look on the face of Xie Yanke, he didn't seem like he has come here to murder him. Two people looked at each other for half a day but both didn't flinch.

After a long time, Xie Yanke finally said in a fierce voice: "Good, I have received the black steel symbol from your hand, you want me to handle any matter for you, just mention in quickly. Whatever it is...even a highly difficult matter or a common one, just tell it."

Shi ZhongYu was shocked for a moment when Xie Yanke asked him to give a wish and he will fulfill it. He actually recalled that he had heard somewhere about the black steel symbol but when Xie Yanke himself proclaimed about this matter then he understood the matter. He already understood that Xie Yanke has mistaken him for that simpleton who he has sent to Ling Xiao city as a scapegoat. He also listened that Xie Yanke said that whatever the problem is, no matter how difficult, he will accomplish it. He thought that he can ask for large amount of wealth but thought that this person has high martial art skills, I should ask for something which should really help me. He cannot help but hesitated and looked a bit confused.

Xie Yanke saw him looking pleasantly surprised and said: "I have vowed that I will fulfill one command for that black steel symbol. There is not a single person in the martial art realm that I am afraid of. Gouzazhong, you have not died unexpectedly, it is your good luck. How did you manage to regulate the Yin and Yang energy streams?"

He thought in his heart, this boy was a really stupid, how did he manage to

control the Yin and yang energy streams in his body. By now they should have attacked his internal organs and he should have been dead.

Shi ZhongYu listened him saying "Gouzazhong" and about the Yin and Yang energy streams. He knew that Gouzazhong was a kind of curse which people use all the time but didn't have any knowledge about the Yin and Yang energy stream. However he did not showed neither approval nor disapproval and immediately showed a faint smile and thought in his heart: "That simpleton will reach the Ling Xiao city and reveal the truth to Old master Bai and Bai Wanjian, Once Feng Wanli will learn about this matter, why will he give up looking for me?" He thought about his rotten luck and thought that his life will be really difficult in this martial art world. This was actually a good opportunity to get rid of those snow mountain sect people. The strength of snow mountain sect and clan of eternal happiness is almost same and we can't defeat them directly. I should use this opportunity to get my redemption and be free from the snow mountain sect"

He said immediately: "Master Xie keeps his words; you are truly worthy of respect. Actually this matter I want master Xie to manage is really very difficult task and little shocking but the martial art skills of master Xie is unparalleled in the world, I am pretty sure it won't be that difficult for you."

Xie Yanke heard him saying these words and felt relieved that he is not going to harm myself and just want me to do some other task and got happy. He asked hurriedly: "What matter do you want me to handle?" He was really anxious in his heart and did not notice at all that Shi ZhongYu was talking in a very elegant manner, which is entirely different with Gouzazhong.

Shi Zhong Yu said: "I asking with master Xie to go to Ling Xiao city and kill the people from the Snow mountain sect."

Xie Yanke was slightly startled; he thought that the snow mountain sect is a famous sect in the martial arts world. The power and virtue gentleman has good reputation and also is a big master who was not extremely easy to defeat but if he has to exterminate them all then it is easier said than done. But since the opposite party has gotten down to this topic then he has to do it no matter the difficulty. He said immediately: "Good, I will do that; I am leaving." As he said he turned around to leave.

Shi ZhongYu called out: "Master Xie hold on a minute!"

Xie Yanke has turned around, said: "What's wrong?" He suspected that Gouzazhong has giving this command for extermination of snow mountain sect is purely the idea of Bei Haishi and others. He was not aware of any enmity of clan of eternal happiness and the snow mountain sect and such a bitter hatred that they want to annihilate the entire sect. He only hoped that it's better to depart early or he was afraid that this Bei Haishi will play some other clever trick.

Shi ZhongYu said: "Master Xie, I and you should go together; I must personally see you completing this matter!"

As soon as he listened that Xie Yanke has consented to exterminate the snow mountain sect; he thought of killing two birds with one stone. This way he will have a good opportunity to get rid of the clan of eternal happiness and snow mountain sect both.

Xie Yanke swore in the past that he will complete only one wish but Shi ZhongYu said that he will travel together with him, actually this was related to his earlier task so he couldn't reject it, he said: "Good, you come with me too."

The people from clan of eternal happiness were all greatly anxious; they all looked at Bei Haishi.

Shi ZhongYu said in a loud voice: "I have already complied to proceed toward the island of heroes on invitation; this huge burden will be shouldered by me only. I will be there at the appointed time so everybody be relieved that I will not embarrass you all."

Bei Haishi was already severely wounded, any way he couldn't expect to hold Xie Yanke and Shi Bangzhu. He had already heard him consenting to his verbal command, so trying to detain them was out of question. He only sighed and said: "Brothers.....Help the Bangzhu for the journey, onceOncehe takes the road ...SubordinatesCoughsplease don't follow him!"

Shi ZhongYu clasped his fist and put it across his chest and greeted them and then left with Xie Yanke.

Xie Yanke sneers and said: "Gouzazhong; you are a fool, you listened to that Physician Bei and asked me to exterminate the snow mountain sect, what is your

enmity with them? You said that Physician Bei presented you the leadership of the sect but he only wanted you to go to island of heroes instead of him. You are foolish to believe on that group of deceitful ominous crafty gangsters. Why don't you ask me to do something more beneficial to you?"

Suddenly he thought: "Luckily he has not called me to take the leadership of the sect and go the island of the heroes in his place instead." Although his martial arts skills were high, but the island of heroes was a dreaded place after all, as he thought of this matter, he was secretly rejoiced and ridiculed him: "Damn, finally I am fortunate, you Gouzazhong, if had intelligence of a bull....your grandfather might have extreme bad luck!"

At this time Shi ZhongYu had already issued the verbal command so Xie Yanke did not feared him any more and started to insult him dissolutely, If this boy wanted him to handle the second matter than he was not obliged to do that.

Shi ZhongYu on the other hand did not dare to talk too much; he greeted him with smile said: "This matter might offend many people."

He thought in his heart: "Damn, grandfather you are really lucky, this is really true, if your Gouzazhong had any intelligence than grandfather really would have been in trouble"

As they left the clan of eternal happiness; Dingdang too left the clan and joined them on the road and they all came to Ling Xiao city.

Although Shi ZhongYu was traveling with Xie Yanke but they didn't talked much. Shi ZhongYu was afraid that he might recognize so didn't talked to him. As they reached Ling Xiao city all three people steal into the Ling Xiao city. Shi ZhongYu had once lived in the city for many years, so he was familiar with each place and pathways. However the city had suffered some big change, there was no one to defend the important highways or the main gate and three people effortlessly entered the city.

Xie Yanke came across and killed four third generation disciple of snow mountain sect as he entered the gate. They heard the people discussing diversely, some were indignant, some were afraid, some wanted to run away, some wanted to plan to face this situation. Xie Yanke and Shi ZhongYu at once knew that Ling Xiao city is some sort of turmoil and there is some huge internal

struggle, they thought that this is actually a heaven-sent opportunity. They suddenly heard that the Shi Qing couple has been captured too.

Although Shi ZhongYu had a poor character but still he loved his parents very much. He immediately got hold of those people and extracted the information about the place where they were kept. Xie Yanke after all had come to kill the snow mountain people so they all went to that place and killed several people of snow mountain sect and rescued Shi Qing and Min Rou and then arrived at the hall.

In the meantime Grandma Shi, Bai Wanjian, Shi Potian and others were in the stone jail talking to Bai Zizai. Xie Yanke actually wanted to kill each person as they come but Shi Qing and Min Rou advised vigorously against it.

Shi Qing said: "Is this a chivalrous behavior of a real man, if you want to fight then face the sect leader of the snow mountain sect "power and virtue gentleman". We husband and wife cannot kill the people of a later generation first and definitely not at this moment. If people in the martial art world will hear that they will say the skyscraping resident got perturbed in difficult situation and actually bullied the weak and fears the strong opponents."

Xie Yanke sneered and said: "I have to exterminate all of them in any case; it doesn't matter if I kill the old first and then kills the younger ones."

As soon as Grandma Shi and Bai Wanjian and others got there, they started to fight. Although Bai Wanjian had good martial art skills but he was no match to the sky scrapping resident. In a few moves, he was surrounded by perils. Cheng Zixue and Liao Zimian earlier heard Xie Yanke proclaiming that he is here to exterminate the entire snow mountain sect and immediately went forward to attack and also help Bai Wanjian. It was now three against one; still all of them couldn't block his swift and fiercely matchless 'Green Needles Clean-Palm Technique'. When Shi Potian entered the hall, Grandma Shi and Liang Zijin were on the verge of joining the fight. Unexpectedly Xie Yanke was greatly surprise and the fight stopped.

Shi ZhongYu saw that the martial arts of Shi Potian was really good and quite different from his and feared that the snow mountain sect will try to settle old matters with him. Shi Potian was also feeling awkward but saw A'Xiu safe and

sound and felt relieved.

Although Dingdang adored Shi ZhongYu but also detested his relentless loose character, after spending so much time with Shi Potian and seeing his behavior in retrospection, actually she also secretly liked him.

By this time Shi Qing couple has understood that they actually came with Shi Potian to Ling Xiao city earlier. They were ashamed but could not control themselves to look the irony of the situation, they have already once admitting their mistake for not recognizing him correctly but now he has actually deceived them and pretended as their son.

The couple to shook their head and thought: "the Shi Qing couple can't even recognize their son, they will become a big joke in the martial arts world, whenever they will run into the old friend in the future, they always be ridiculed for this incident."

They asked together: "Shi Bangzhu, why you did you disguised that sore throat and exchanged place with Yu'er?"

Grandma Shi heard Shi Potian saying that her husband is not willing to come out from the prison and actually asking her to go to Azure Conch Mountain, she hurriedly asked: "Who won in that fight between you and your grandfather? Why did your grandfather wants me to go to Azure Conch Mountain?"

Xie Yanke asked: "How are there two Gouzazhong? What is this matter?"

Bai Wanjian shouted loudly: "Shi Zhong Yu, what is happening?"

Dingdang said: "You have not told anything yet...you haven't revealed the secret, isn't it?"

Several people asked Shi Potian questions after another and he didn't who to answer first....he opened his mouth to reply but got confused?

He saw a middle-aged woman coming out from the back of the hall and asked A'Xiu: "A'Xiu, in between these two boys, which one is good, which one is bad?" This woman was wife of Bai Wanjian and mother of A'Xiu. When she heard about A'Xiu falling from the cliff, her mental state became unstable because of grief. When the first generation disciples like Qi Zimian, Liao Zili and others revolted, no one paid attention to her. This time when A'Xiu returned to the Ling Xiao city

along with her grandmother, she first went to see her mother. She was the favored daughter and her mother sobered immediately after seeing that she is safe. Now when the hall was in confusion than he at this moment she opened her mouth to ask.

Grandma Shi called out loudly: "No one quarrel, if everyone will ask at the same time than how will this matter be resolved?"

As soon as the people listened o her, they calmed down. Xie Yanke sneered but also no longer spoke.

Grandma Shi said: "You reply me first, you and grandfather contend in martial arts; who won?"

The snow mountain sect people looked at Shi Potian, under their heart they were all worried. Bai Zizai was extremely arrogant, perverse and violent, although people were very discontented but if he lost to this youth then the reputation of the snow mountain send will be swept to the floor, this was also not a small matter.

They only heard Shi Potian saying: "Naturally, grandfather won, how I can match grandfather in martial arts? Grandfather said that he will teach me some shallow skills, he hit me about 70-80 fists and also kicked me about 20-30 times but I did not manage to hit even a single fist or kick."

Bai Wanjian and others felt relieved in their heart as they listened to him.

Grandma Shi narrowed her eyes and looked at him, she asked: "Why are you not injured?"

Shi Potian said: "Grandfather had shown mercy. Afterward he got tired and sat down on the ground; I saw his breathing was irregular so I helped him. At this moment he is excellent condition."

Xie Yanke sneered and said: "So that's how it is!"

Grandma Shi said: "What did your grandfather say?"

Shi Potian said: "He said: I got crazy in my arrogance, and something about sin and grave, you go from this place quickly, I henceforth want to see no but only the wall, ask your grandmother to go to Azure Conch Mountain and leave the

Ling Xiao city and never return again." He didn't know some characters and idioms so gave his own version. Bai Zizai said "sin is grave" and "conceitedly" and "faces the wall to think of faults", he was unable to repeat but other people actually guessed correctly.

Grandma Shi got angry: "This old man, what is he talking? Why would I go to Azure Conch Mountain?"

Grandma Shi was called Xiao Cui when she was young because she was pretty like a flower. Several people in the martial arts world really adored her. Bei Zizai and Ding Busi were most outstanding of the suitors. Bai Zizai as always arrogant and Shi Xiaocui did not want to marry him but her parents settled on Bai Zizai because he was more famous and better martial arts. So she was finally betrothed to the leader of the snow mountain sect. At the beginning, Shi Xiaocui often quarreled with her husband and also complained about her own parents and even said that if she was married to Ding Busi then this thing might not be happening.

Actually the conduct of Ding Busi was more eccentric, he was far worse than Bai Zizai but as they say, the grass is always greener on the other side.

Shi Xiaocui sometimes just to annoy her husband used to admire Ding Busi and intentionally exaggerate his skills and within half a minute will actually spoke of his ten skills. Bai Zizai was always greatly irritated but actually had no alternative. This matter continued but soon she gave birth to Bai Wanjian. Shi Xiaocui raised her beloved son in Ling Xiao city and afterwards never ever mentioned Ding Busi again for dozens of years. Bai Zizai also didn't think about this matter and actually did doubt her.

Unexpectedly after getting to this old age, Grandma Shi left the Ling Xiao city after that incident with Shi ZhongYu and A'Xiu. Bai Zizai slapped her on her face so she rescued A'Xiu and didn't return back in anger and proceeded toward the central plains and vowed to teach her husband a good lesson.

They were passing through Wuchang prefecture when unexpectedly they ran in to Ding Busi. Both people had bid their farewell in young age and after her marriage they never got the opportunity to meet again but the circumstances were a lot different this time. Ding Busi had in his foolishness never married

throughout. He invited her to Azure Conch Mountain and stay their. Both people were around sixty years old so one cannot say that his sentiments were romantic in nature but Ding Busi never let go the disappointment of not marrying Shi Xiaocui and just wanted her to set her foot at the Azure Conch Mountain once and than he can rest in peace.

Grandma Shi resisted this idea but Ding Busi did not relent. He kept on striving and afterwards this matter actually dragged on for a long time. Grandma Shi got extremely angry, after all the discussion reached a stalemate, they fought for several moves. The martial art of Grandma Shi was inferior to Ding Busi but he did not want to hurt her. Whenever there was a crucial moment, he would always show mercy. Grandma Shi was mad and also anxious to match him. She was practicing some martial arts when she got some severe internal injury and Ding Busi caught them on the river boat unexpectedly with A'Xiu. She didn't want to go to Azure Conch Mountain so she threw herself from the boat and tried to suicide. Fortunately Shi Potian was there and he helped them to save their lives. Afterward when she saw Ding brothers and Bai Wanjian in the Azure Mist Island, Grandma Shi was not willing to meet either of them as it would have been awkward so she took A'Xiu and ran away from that mountain.

Ding Busi hadn't seen Xiaocui for dozens of years but after meeting her again he couldn't brought her to Azure Conch Mountain because of her stubbornness. He said that he will do anything to get her to Azure Conch Mountain at least once. He knew that the he has enmity with her husband but if he can capture him and bring him to Azure Conch Island then she will definitely set her foot on Azure Conch Mountain. Usually his relation with his elder brother was not that good but for this task he asked for his help and both brothers came to Ling Xiao city.

When Ding brothers arrived at the Ling Xiao city, Grandma Shi had not returned. When Ding Busi received this information that she is not there, he fabricated a story that Xiaocui had arrived on the Azure Conch Mountains and had stayed there for a lot of time. He was really sad that Xiaocui didn't come to his place so and also that he couldn't marry when the opportunity was there. Bai Zizai was his love rival and he really wanted to hurt him. Initially Bai Zizai didn't believe that Grandma Shi went there but Ding Busi rephrased the words of

grandma Shi in his own words and spoke in a convincing manner. Everything he told fitted perfectly and he couldn't restrain himself from believing his lies. After some time they all started fighting and both parties got injured but Bai Zizai let them go and they immediately left the city.

Although the Ding brothers left but Bai Zizai took their word to his heart. He got extremely angry and the bitterness didn't leave his heart. And he actually became more and more mentally unstable as the days went past and created havoc in the Ling Xiao city.

After Grandma Shi returned to the Ling Xiao city and saw her husband in such pathetic condition, in her heart she regretted her decision to leave and thought that his condition is partly because his arrogance and partly because of her leaving him. When she heard Shi Potian saying that at this moment he is sitting facing towards the wall and asked her to go to Azure Conch Mountain and never come back then she thought immediately: "We have been husband and wife and have arrived at such a old age, how can it be that I can bid goodbye again? He must be punishing himself in the stone prison; I will also accompany him there and will die with him in the same place." Suddenly she changed her mind and thought: "I can take hundred million knives to let go the position of sect leader but I have to go to island of heroes and keep the appointment. If I avoid this then how can I see my disciple to lose his life futilely and A'Xiu as a widow in such a young age? This matter is hard to be satisfactory to both sides, but what else can be done? Oh, I have to think about this matter later first let us handle this old lunatic." And she turned towards him.

Bai Wanjian missed his father and wanted to go to him immediately but first his primary attention was towards his archenemy. The sect existence was in danger today and it was a matter of life and death, so he turned towards Xie Yanke to deal with him first.

Xie Yanke took a look at Shi ZhongYu and looked at Shi Potian, he was trying to distinguish who was actually Gouzazhong but was finding pretty hard. If he went by the manner in which they spoken then Shi Potian was most likely the Gouzazhong but when he compared the martial art skills and the ease with which he drew back Bai Wanjian, his martial art skills were really profound compared to Gouzazhong when he was at skyscraping cliff. He thought how can

he acquire such a level of skills in such a short time? His face turned red and he shouted in great anger: "Out of you two boys, who is Gouzazhong?" When he shouted the lime mud and thin bamboos from the roof fell as he raised his hand to kill people.

Shi ZhongYu didn't know that "Gouzazhong" (a colloquial abuse) was in fact the name of Shi Potian. He saw that Xie Yanke was extremely angry and might get violent. He thought that his plot to destroy the Snow mountain sect is anyway doomed. He reverted back to his original tendency to pass the blame on others and in the meanwhile wait for an opportunity to escape. He said immediately: "I am not, he...he is Gouzazhong!"

Xie Yanke stared at him and sneered, he said: "Aren't you really Gouzazhong?"

Shi ZhongYu looked at him and really got scared and said hurriedly: "I am not."

Xie Yanke looked at Shi Potian and asked: "Then you are Gouzazhong?"

Shi Potian nodded and said: "Yes, grandpa, you taught me how to practice martial arts, that day suddenly my whole body sometimes felt extremely cold and sometime really hot, the pain was difficult to bear and after that I fainted. Once I awoke I recovered and lots of strange thing happened. Grandpa, how were you doing in my absence? Who was washing your clothes and cooking meal for you. I often worry about you, I thought that how are managing your daily chores without me, it must be really painstaking you." His words were full of sincerity and care.

Xie Yanke didn't doubt him now and thought: "This dumb kid really cares for me." He turns his head to Shi ZhongYu and asked: "You pretend to be this person, actually you asked me to do all of this.... Hmmm...your courage is not small...courage is not small!"

Shi Qing and Min Rou saw that Xie Yanke was really angry, his face was flushed red with anger and it was apparent that he was offended that this boy has deceived him, In his uncontrollable rage, even if put a hand then their son will be dead in a moment. They immediately leapt together hurriedly and stood in front of Shi Zhong and blocked his body from his attack.

Min Rou said quickly: "Master Xie, you are an elder in the martial art realm, please forgive this young child, he is ignorant, II will ask him to kowtow and

accept his crime to you!"

Xie Yanke was concerned that Shi ZhongYu has fooled him and didn't care if Shi couple were pleading in front of him. He sneered and said: "Xie bullying a young boy, how many knocks do you think that I will need to settle? Draw back!" As he said these two words "draws back", he moved both his hands and attacked both of them vigorously. Although the internal energy of Shi Qing and Min Rou was not superficial but unexpectedly they couldn't manage to keep their foothold steady and fell several steps back.

Shi Potian saw Min Rou getting hit and was frightened incomparably, tears flowed copiously and he hurriedly called: "Grandpa, you cannot kill him!"

Xie Yanke was accumulating his internal energy in his right palm and was just making a move to attack Shi ZhongYu. Shi Potian not only saved Shi ZhongYu but also about ten-fifteen people around him in the hall. As soon as Shi Potian shouted out and asking Xie Yanke to not do a task he immediately held and turned his head to ask: "Do you want me not to kill him?" he thought that he might have to forgive this young boy but if that means that he will be free from the vow for black steel symbol then that will be a good deal. He looked at him with happy expression.

Shi Potian said: "Yes, this person is son of the Shi couple. Dingdang also likes him very much howeverhoweverthe behavior of this person is not good, he bullied A'Xiu and likes deceiving people, he also did a lot of misdemeanors in clan of eternal happiness."

Xie Yanke said: "You said that you want me not to kill him?" Although his martial art was such outstanding but as he spoke these words, the sound was unexpectedly somewhat trembling in fear that Shi Potian might renege.

Shi Potian said: "Good, please do not kill him. However this person always injures someone, it will better if you take him with you and teach him and make him a better person...a changed man...a good person. I want you to take him with you. Grandpa, your heart is the best; you kept me with you for several years and taught me martial arts. Since I was not able to find my mother, I was totally dependent on you and you only raised me. So long as this Brother Shi is following you, you will take good care of him surely and will turn into a good person."

"Heart is the best"...Shi Potian said these four words to thank him but Xie Yanke actually cannot restrain himself from getting angry. He thought that he only said these words to deride him and his complexion turned red but as he saw Shi Potian his mind changed and he couldn't decide whether to laugh or cry.

He knew that the Shi Potian had said these words with complete sincerity; he recalled that for several years, only he and Shi Potian were living on the skyscraping cliff. He was actually cunning to him but Shi Potian was always innocent and did not ever suspect his real intention. He thought that earlier he never paid attention but this boy was concerned about how I am cooking my food and washing my cloths in his absence. After he lost his mother, he actually stayed with him. Xie Yanke just wanted to take advantage of him but now as those memories flooded back, he was actually deeply grateful to him that he has only asked him to teach Shi ZhongYu but he thought in his heart: "Dumb kid is talking nonsense, I am always roaming in the martial art world and come and go freely, how can I tag along this lowly youth?"

He said: "I don't consent to this matter, you want me not to kill this person, I have done that...now I am leaving. I say goodbye and henceforth we will never meet."

Shi Potian said: "No, no, grandpa, you.... If you don't teach him well, he will deceive people or injure someone and finally will get killed by someone else and Madam Shi and Dingdang will again be sad. I ask you to teach him and take him with you, so long as he doesn't become a good person, you cannot leave him. My mother taught me never to ask anything thing from someone howeverhowever this matter is really important, I must ask you."

Xie Yanke wrinkled his brow, he thought that this matter is kind of feminine and fussy; one can say that it is really difficult and the other hand one can also say that it is really easy too but if someone is not a good person by nature then how can he make him do the right things? This Shi ZhongYu is such a deceitful person that even if he is taught by Confucius, I am afraid one can't say that he will be successful. If I agree for this matter then it will be a burden on my head until my death. He shook his head again and again, and said: "No...No...it won't work, this matter I can't agree to. You set this addition condition later....I can't grant you that."

Shi Qing laughed suddenly and said: "I thought that skyscraping resident Xie Yanke will live up to his vow and will grant any command of the person who returned him the Black steel symbol. The black steel symbol was famous in the martial art realm for some reason. So many people lost their life for that symbol in Hou Jianji...it's such an injustice to them."

Xie Yanke wrinkled his eyebrow and said fiercely: "What you want to imply manor master Shi?"

Shi Qing said: "This little brother asks you to teach my son. That Black steel symbol was handed over to you by this little brother on the same day in Hou Jianji and we husband and wife were the witness. Apart from us Brother Geng, Brother Wang and numerous brothers and sisters from the Snow mountain sect witnessed it. I heard about the legend of this symbol and your reputation along with it suggested it's authenticity but I am really surprised that when this little brother asked you to do a certain task then you are actually refusing?"

Xie Yanke got angry and said: "You have given birth to such a son, you have to teach him? He has disgraced not only himself but you and your entire family. If I would have been in your place then I would have already executed cleanly him!"

Shi Qing said: "My son is stubbornly disobedient; I was not strict enough that is why I was looking for a strict teacher but it's really hard to find one! An able person like you can carve an ordinary stone in to precious jade."

Xie Yanke said in anger: "I will carve him with my belt, in less than three months I will carve a ghost out of him! Then I will see that who is the clever one here?"

Xie Yanke talked to them in this manner because he knew that if his own parents refuse to send Shi ZhongYu with him then Shi Potian can't force him to take this boy. He thought that the Shi Qing couple were in a awkward situation and Shi Potian will eventually accept it as fate and will say: "fine master Xie, if that is the case then you are free from the promise and can leave." As he imagined that Shi Potian will say such words, he couldn't restrain himself and smiled.

Min Rou looked with pleading eyes towards Shi Qing and could not restrain herself and called out: "Shishu!" She thought that sending their son with Xie

Yanke would be more unfortunate than fortunate and wanted her husband to stop this matter.

Who would have thought Shi Qing won't pay attention towards her and said: "In the martial art realm, if someone will ask about Xie Yanke then everyone will approve inarguably that he is a chivalrous person and tell that Master Xie is real hero and everybody respect him. Master Xie can renege on his oath.....this is not possible...it is not in the character of the famous skyscraping resident."

Xie Yanke only the smiled but did not speak. The complexion of Min Rou changed to red and she was suddenly really scared about her son.

Xie Yanke said to Shi ZhongYu: "Boy, you are coming with me; if you do not turn into a good person then grandfather will remove a layer of your skin every day."

Shi ZhongYu was really afraid and he looked at his father and mother with teary eyes. Min Rou too was afraid; she looked at Shi Potian and hoped that he will change his command.

Shi Potian actually said: "Brother Shi, you do not need to fear, Master Xie disguises himself as a very menacing person but in reality he is the best person. So long as you cook him a meal to eat, wash his clothes, grow vegetables, cut firewood and raise chickens, he will not even put a single finger on you. I have followed him for several years, he treats me exactly like as my mother and also taught me a lot of martial arts."

Xie Yanke listened him comparing him with his mother and cannot help but heaves a deep sigh and thought in his heart: "Your mother was a crazy woman, who names her own son "Gouzazhong". The entire martial art realm trembles with fear when hear my name and this stupid boy is comparing the skyscraping resident with that crazy woman!"

Shi ZhongYu couldn't restrain himself and cried out: "You want me to wash clothes, to grow vegetables, cut firewood and raise chickens. You also want me to cook a meal for him every day, are you serious?"

Shi Potian also said: "Brother Shi, if the clothes of master Xie are torn then you also has to sew them. Master Xie also likes a lot of variety in his food so you have to keep switching; it will be best if you don't repeat the same food within ten

days."

Xie Yanke sneered and said: "Master Shi Qing and madam Shi, you two husband and wife were also looking for that black steel symbol in Hou Jianji and wanted me to fulfill one of your command. At that time perhaps you wanted to hire me to teach your son?"

Shi Qing looked straight towards Shi ZhongYu and stared him for a moment. Shi ZhongYu was really scared out of his wits as though his father has cornered him like a mouse in cat's paw.

Shi Qing said: "Does not dare. Actually we husband and wife had big enmity with a person and that person had killed our other child. We wanted your help regarding that matter only. This person is henceforth in concealment after that incident and we have not seen him for years. We husband and wife have looked everywhere for ten years but haven't been successful."

Xie Yanke said: "At that time if have acquired that black steel symbol then would you have asked for revenge?"

Shi Qing said: "to ask you to kill someone, I don't dare but Master Xie is all-resourceful, we would have asked you to look up for that person's whereabouts."

Xie Yanke said: "If that Black steel symbol would have fallen in your hands then I would have probably thanked heaven and earth."

Shi Qing bowed in front of him with his hands clasped and said: "My son has a character to deceive others, Shi Qing feels grateful for your limitless kindness. We husband and wife will burn incense and pray hereafter and hope that master has a long life." He said these words with utmost sincerity.

Xie Yanke said: "Fine..." he put out a hand to get his baggage and leapt in the air to reach Shi ZhongYu. He moved his left hand and grabbed Shi ZhongYu by his right wrist and jumped out of the hall. They all heard the sound of Shi ZhongYu screaminghowever the sound started fading quickly as they went far and away very swiftly.

Various people were looking at each other with amazement as this happened. Suddenly Dingdang came near Shi Potian and slapped him severely on his face

and yelled: "Elder brother Shi...Elder brother Shi!" and started weeping.

Shi Potian caressed his cheek and said in consternation: "Dingdang, why do you hit me?"

Shi Qing picked up the cloth wrapper, untied it and bound the famous black and white swords of theirs. Min Rou did not look happy at all and in fact she was completely soaked in tears, she said: "Shishu...Elder brother....why did you let him take Yu'er? "

Shi Qing sighed and said: "Shimei, Yu'er had turned in to this kind of a person....do you know why?"

Min Rou said: "YouYou blamed me to favor him." As she spoke these words, tears again started to flow unceasingly from her eyes.

Shi Qing said: "You were too good to Yu'er, when a person should be firm during his formative years, you were actually completely submissive. I saw him in his small age, whenever he was stubborn or disobedient; you always obstructed me to punish him. In reality it is really hard to teach him, I hardened my heart to send him to Ling Xiao city but who would have thought that his nature is too bad, instead because of his deeds, we husband and wife are ashamed to face people of the snow mountain sect. master Xie is perfect teacher for Yu'er. This method is exactly like treating poison with poison, once he becomes a good person then you will feel relieved. The skyscraping resident handles affairs in a willful manner but he is actually a very fine person. This little brother wanted him to teach Yu'er, he will do that in the best manner possible, don't doubt about his integrity."

Min Rou said: "ButBut, Yu'er is pampered since childhood, how he will cook a meal....." As she spoke these words, she again started sobbing.

Shi Qing said: "All these problems arise only because he was too much pampered in his childhood".

Suddenly they saw Bai Wanjian and rest of people moving outside the hall as someone informed about Grandma Shi and Bai Zizai. Shi Qing bent himself closer to his wife's ear and said in a low voice: "If I have not send Yu'er away with master Xie then this matter was not that easy to resolve. Snow mountain sect has great enmity with Yu'er; do you think they would have let him go so easily?"

Min Rou was swayed with maternal love towards her son and didn't look at this matter in a rational way. Once Shi told these words, she realized the truth and felt relieved, she said to Shi Potian: "You have rescued my son's life, II really did not knowhow to thank you. He has deliberately tried to harm and deceive you but you have always helped him....If I have youyou" she wanted to say: "If I have you as my son...it would have been such a fortune." But she couldn't manage to say these words.

Shi Potian thought about Shi ZhongYu and saw that Min Rou loves her so much and cares for him, under his heart he actually envied him. Min Rou has twice mistaken him as their son and treasured him in every possible way; he didn't had much memory of his own mother but his own mother never treated him with such love and care. On the other hand Min Rou was even ready to give her life for her son, he felt dejected as he thought about this matter.

Min Rou asked: "Younger brother Shi, how did you disguised as Yu'er and hid the truth from us all the way!"

The face of Shi Potian turned red and he said: "Dingdang did that"

Suddenly Wang Wanren came breathlessly and called out: "NoIt is not good, we can't find master anywhere."

The people in the hall were all startled, they asked together: "Where did he disappear?"

Wang Wanren only said: "Master has disappeared."

A'Xiu pulled the sleeve of Shi Potian and said: "Come with me quickly!"

Both people ran towards the prison anxiously. As they reached outside, they saw that the road was firmly crammed full of the snow mountain disciples. Various people saw A'Xiu and gave her way. Both people entered inside and saw Bai Wanjian was supporting Grandma Shi and she was sitting on the ground.

A'Xiu called out hurriedly: "Father, mother and grandmotherHow? How are you injured?"

Bai Wanjian had murder written all over his face, he went mad and shouted: "Had that traitor attacked you mother, who else could have blocked your acupuncture using this technique. Father has killed so many disciples but now he

has attacked you. I am going to look for father." As he was saying these words, he jumped outside to leave. He cleared the front row of disciples and pushed through layers of disciple to move out in big strides.

A'Xiu said: "Eldest brother, you help the grandmother and unblock her acupuncture."

Shi Potian said: "Yes!" he didn't waste any time and quickly went behind her and put out his hand to unblock the acu-point using the technique once taught to him by Grandma Shi. After some time he was able to gradually unblock all three of the blocked acu-points.

Grandma Shi called out immediately: "Everybody calm down, there is no need for this chaos, the sect leader has blocked my acupuncture point, and he is gone now!"

As soon as the people listened these words, they were completely stunned, someone said: "master has blocked the acupuncture point with his own hands, no wonder elder brother Bai was not able to unblock."

At this time the people in snow mountain sect were really confused about who exactly is their leader. They didn't usually call the leader by his name but they were also afraid that if that old lunatic is acknowledged as the leader then he will start the slaughter again. These husband and wife have to resolve this matter immediately.

Bai Wanjian heard about this and hurried back, he asked: "mother, what happened?"

He was really disgruntled. He was really confused and embarrassed by this matter of his parents and he thought that people should instead name him the "mad of northwest" but all this matter was because of his parents and he couldn't vent his anger on them.

Grandma Shi said angrily: "You have not done anything....how can you blame your parents?"

Bai Wanjian said: "Child does not dare."

Grandma Shi said: "Your father said his goodbye to you all and left for the island of the heroes."

Bai Wanjian was startled, he asked: "To the island of heroes? Why?"

Grandma Shi said: "Why? Your father is the genuine leader of the snow mountain sect. if he does not go, then who else will go? I arrived here and said to your father that if he wants to imprison in this prison for rest of his life then I will also like to accompany him but I have to leave for island of heroes so I can't.

He asked the reason and told him the details. He said: "I am a leader, naturally I will go."

I urged him to further consider this matter. He said: "I was unfair to the snow mountain sect, I have killed so many innocent disciples, those two physicians, I wish I wouldn't have killed them. I will go for the snow mountain sect and redeem my big crime and save life of my son, wife, granddaughter, granddaughter's husband and numerous disciples." He put out his hand and blocked my several acupuncture points and took the bronze medals and went away."

Bai Wanjian said: "Mother, father is old; he is not well; how can he go? I am his son and I should go."

Grandma Shi said: "You arrived just yesterday...you still don't understand your father." As she said these words, she went outside the room.

Bai Wanjian said: "Mother, youare you going too?"

Grandma Shi said: "I am the leader of the Golden Phoenix sect; I have the qualifications to go to the island of heroes."

Bai Wanjian was utterly confused, he thought: "Whoever goes to the island of heroes, no one comes back....they all die there...is that the end."

Chapter 19 - Eight Meal Gruel

On the fifth day of the last lunar month, Grandma Shi arrived at a small fishing village on the shore of the South China Sea accompanied by Shi Qing, Min Rou, Bai Wanjian, Shi Potian, A'Xiu, Qi Zimian, Liang Zijin, Cheng Zixue and some other people.

When Grandma Shi left the Ling Xiao city, she appointed Geng Wanzhong as the acting sect leader and Wang Wanyi, Huyan Wan as his subordinates. "Dragon of fire and wind" Feng Wanli was not considered as he participated in the revolt against Bai Zizai, although he was compelled by the unusual turn of the events but still he colluded with others to imprison Bai Wanjian and other fellow-disciples without any reason. Grandma Shi brought the three first generation disciples, Qi Zimian, Liang Zijin and Cheng Zixue who were involved in that incident with her so they don't create trouble for their juniors. Liao Zili was left behind because he experienced a very severe wound and lost all his martial art skills so he was unable to create any trouble.

The two bronze medals given by the envoys of island of heroes have the time and place of their meeting inscribed on the other side of it, They wanted everyone who have obtained the bronze medals to follow those instructions however the meeting date, time and place was different for each person. The people who arrived with Grandma Shi detected that nobody has left the fishing village and also no other person of outstanding ability from the martial art world was present apart from them in the village. They also didn't found any continual boat traffic at the shore so it was really difficult to seek Bai Zizai or his trail.

Various people took shelter in thatched hut temporarily to take rest. In the evening, a man in yellow cloths came to the village on a small boat rowing the oar and called in a loud voice: "The Island of Heroes welcomes the guests, I respectfully request the sect leader of clan of eternal happiness Shi Bangzhu to commence the journey."

Grandma Shi and others heard this and came out of that hut. That man came to Shi Potian and bowed in front of him to salute and said: "If I am correct you are Shi Bangzhu."

Shi Potian said: "yes.... Your Excellency...what is your surname?"

That person said: "I am surnamed Zhao, May I ask Shi Bangzhu to start the journey."

Shi Potian said: "I have a lot of friend and subordinates who want to go to Island of heroes too."

That person said: "I am really embarrassed. This small boat is unable to withstand this heavy load. The island hosts have proclaimed a strict order that only Shi Bangzhu will be greeted, if I carried even one person more than one then this small boat will sink in the sea or my head will be chopped off even if we manage to succeed."

Grandma Shi sneered and said: "At this moment, you should be only afraid of who is in front of you." She tried to bully that person and brought her hand on the sword hilt.

That person did not pay attention to Grandma Shi and said to the Shi Potian: "I will show you the way, Shi Bangzhu please follow me."

They reached the sand beach where the small boat was anchored between two small hills. The width of the small boat was about three feet and the length about six feet. It was really a small boat and it was difficult to say that it will be able to hold both these people let alone accommodating someone else.

That person said: "You can kill me with only slight effort but only in case anyone of you knows the way to the island of heroes then you may accompany Shi Bangzhu."

Grandma Shi and Shi Qing looked at each other in blank dismay; they had not thought that the island of heroes will plan so thoroughly that only one person can go. Various people have only listened of the name of island of heroes but no one was aware of its location. People have heard these three words "island of heroes" but no one knew where exactly it is located, several famed sailors have ventured in the ocean but no one had any clue about this island and where to look in this boundless sea. They looked out in all directions as far as they can see but found no ships on the shore or on sea and were thus unable to track this boat.

Grandma Shi was startled and in great rage extended her palm to hit that person but stopped herself halfway and turned to Shi Potian and said: "Boy, you give me that bronze medal, I will go in place of you, this old woman must go with that old lunatic and we should die together if that's going to happen."

That person in yellow clothes said: "The Island hosts have commanded that if I take the wrong person even by mistake then I will be sentenced to beheading... not only that but my entire family, my parents, my wife and children will be beheaded too."

Grandma Shi got angry and said: "cut these sentimental ramblings, what kind of nonsense you are spouting?" As she said these words, she thought in her heart: "I don't like it too...this person is in a really difficult situation."

Suddenly she came up with an idea and said: "Person, you have to take as the leader of clan of eternal happiness to island of heroes. If I am the leader of the clan of eternal happiness then you don't have any problem...isn't it?"

Shi Potian hesitated and said: "Thisis perhaps"

That man said: "The two envoys of command of reward and punishment have explained clearly that the leader of the clan of the eternal happiness was elected in front of them and is a young hero. How can it then be venerable Grandma?"

Grandma Shi said in anger: "Shut up this nonsense! Did you know me to be venerable? Although I am a bit old but I am not your Grandma!"

That person showed a faint smile, he arrived at seashore without consulting anybody and pulled the ship's cable.

Grandma Shi sighed, said: "Good, Boy, you have to go then, listen to my words and tell old Grandpa."

Shi Potian said: "Disciple will obey your command, please tell me what I have to say to Grandpa."

Grandma Shi said: "If there is a slim chance of survival, then you must escape surely and don't try to save grandpa or you will be trapped certainly. This is a strict order from your teacher and you cannot disobey."

Shi Potian was startled and asked: "Why don't you want me to save the

Grandpa? Are you still holding a grudge?"

He thought that even if grandpa had done something wrong but still he have to rescue but Grandma Shi is explicitly asking her to refrain from that.

Grandma Shi also said: "You go to that old lunatic and tell him that I am waiting for him here for three months here, up to the eighth day of third month and if he did not meet me here then I will jump in the sea and die. Also tell him that he will say again something about going to Azure Conch Mountain then I will become an evil spirit and never forgive him."

Shi Potian nodded and said: "Yes!"

A'Xiu said: "Eldest brother, II will also do same, I will wait for you for three months here; If you won't come back then I..... I will also jump into the sea with grandma."

Shi Potian couldn't face her and looked up at the sky and said hurriedly: "You do not have to do this."

A'Xiu said: "I will do this." These four characters were said in a really low sound but were actually filled with regretless firm meaning.

Min Rou said: "Child, I hope you return safely, everybody will be praying for you."

Shi Potian said: "Madame Shi you take care, do not worry about your son, he can improve with Mr. Xie. You do not need for me to be worried that they will send me back because I was an imposter as sect leader of clan of eternal happiness. Zhang San and Li Si are I have become sworn brothers, if elder brothers will see danger then they will definitely help me."

Min Rou said: "I hope so." But in her heart she actually thought: "This child did not know that people in the martial arts world are dangerous, if these kinds of people become sworn brothers, how you can take that seriously?"

Shi Qing said: "Little brother, in island, if a fight breaks out then try to use your internal energy by all means instead of paying attention to the any strategic move or sword skills." He knew that the internal energy of Shi Potian is astonishing and this is only the slim chance of survival.

Shi Potian said: "Yes. Many thank Master Shi for pointers."

Bai Wanjian shook his hand and said: "Virtuous son-in-law, we are a family now. My father is quite old; you must look after him there."

Shi Potian listened calling him "virtuous son-in-law" and his face turned red, he said: "I will pay attention."

Cheng Zixue, Qi Zimian and Liang Zijin all three peoples were actually taking pleasure in others' misfortunes and thought in their hearts: "For thirty years several masters from the martial art world have proceed toward the island of heroes but no one heard about him after that, this boy is not necessarily a superhuman, how can he be exceptional?" But they separately said words like "take care" and "please do look after leader" and so on.

Immediately Shi Potian and people bid their goodbye and moved toward the beach. As the people reached the shore, the eyes of A'Xiu and Min Rou were already red and full of tears.

Grandma Shi suddenly came in front of that person with yellow clothes and slapped in several times on his face. She shouted loudly: "You are impolite to the elders and superiors, I will teach you to know about good and evil!"

That person did not hit back unexpectedly and caressed his hit cheek, showed a faint smile and stepped in the small boat. Shi Potian raised his hand to say goodbye to the people and embarked the boat. That small boat carried two people now, the water level was just about several inches low and it was impossible to carry another person. Fortunately at this time of the year, in winter the South China Sea is mostly uneventful, otherwise if the waves were a bit strong then the boat might have capsized. Perhaps this might be one reason that island of heroes always invited people at this time of the year.

That man has took the oars and moved the boat out away from the beach, he turned around the bow and hoisted a decadent triangular sail which redirected the north wind and the boat moved out slowly towards the final destination.

Shi Potian looked in the north direction and saw that figures of Grandma Shi and A'Xiu and all others gradually became smaller and smaller as they stared at him unceasingly. They all turned in to small sunspot until everyone finally became invisible.

After the nightfall, the small boat changed its direction towards south-east. They sailed on the sea for three days, on the fourth day by midday that man in yellow clothes pointed at the seashore and called out: "That is island of heroes."

Shi Potian counted on his fingers; this indeed was eight day of the last month.

Shi Potian looked at the island and didn't find anything unusual but he cannot restrain his heart more jumping madly, obviously he was really nervous. As they moved in closer to the island he saw a tall rocky mountain, the mountain flourishing with green trees.

The small boat approached the island from its southern seashore. That man said: "Shi Bangzhu, you are invited!" Shi Potian saw that the south of this island had a big sand beach and on the eastern end of it, he was able to see more than forty large or small boats anchoring by a stone cliff.

Shi Potian thought in his heart: "Here there are numerous ships, if I can manage to escape then I simply have to come to this place and then it won't be much difficult to snatch a boat and get out of danger." He leapt to come on the sea shore immediately.

That man raised the ship's cable and also leapt to come ashore. He tied that cable to a big stone and took out a conch from the bosom and blew it several times. Earlier he was not able to see a single person but suddenly four people rushed out of the mountain. They were all wearing yellow colored clothes. They arrived closer to Shi Potian and bowed in front of him.

One person said: "The Island hosts are awaiting your honorable presence in the guesthouse, Shi Bangzhu please come with us."

Shi Potian was concerned about Bai Zizai, he asked: "Did the sect leader of the snow mountain sect, "power and virtue gentleman" has arrived?"

That man said: "Servant are only ordered to serve Shi Bangzhu, other people's matter is not out concern. Shi Bangzhu please come to the guesthouse, you will know." As he was saying these words, he turned around and showed him the way. Shi Potian followed after him and the other four yellow clothes men followed them.

They moved towards the mountain, after some time he saw forest on his both

sides, they followed a mountain path across that forest. Shi Potian paid attention all around the scenery, he assumed that if he has to escape then he can't get confused on these paths so he tried to remember each details.

After several miles, the road turned in to a rock rugged mountain trail, on his left was deep ravine and he also heard the sound of a mountain stream stirring up the stone. Gradually the sound of the mountain stream increased and after some time he was able to sees a waterfall about hundred feet high. It seemed that this waterfall was the source of that mountain stream.

That person who was showing the way took down a slicker hanging from the roadside big tree and gave to Shi Potian and said: "the way to guesthouse is across this waterfall, Shi Bangzhu, please put on this raincoat to avoid getting wet."

Shi Potian received that and put it on. He saw that man approaching the waterfall and then jumped inside it. Shi Potian too followed him and jumped in to the falling water. He landed inside a mountain tunnel. It looked like a long road with oil lamps ignited on both sides. Although it was pretty dark but the lamps provided just enough light to distinguish the path. Shi Potian again followed that person and the rest of servants followed him in a narrow file.

This road was actually built by cutting down a natural mountain tunnel and he was able to see artificial opening at several places where originally it was really narrow. As they went further Shi Potian thought that gradually they are actually moving downwards. He was still able listen the sound of running water, in empty places, the sound reverberated for a long time so Shi Potian was attentive and kept his eyes and ears open for anything unusual.

After about two miles, they saw a portal at the end of the tunnel. It was made up of jade and looked really impressive. On the top of it, three large characters were carved.

Shi Potian asked: "Is this the guesthouse?"

That man said: "yes!" In his heart he found it strange and thought: "it's written clearly then why is he asking? Isn't he literate?" he never realized that Shi Potian was in fact an illiterate and didn't know a character.

He enters that jade portal and saw that the floor was tiled with blue flagstone

and looked neat. That man moved towards the left-hand side of Shi Potian and pointed towards a pit hole and said: "Shi Bangzhu please rest in this place, the island hosts will meet you at the banquet."

That hole was well furnished, three lamps were illuminating the entire room and another person of small stature offered him green tea and desserts.

Shi Potian looked at the food and drinks and suddenly remembered the words of Shi Qing. Shi Qing earnestly urged to him: "Little brother, for 30 years, numerous people of great intellect and martial art skills have gone to the island of heroes and no one have come back unexpectedly. I can't think of a way that those people in the island of heroes managed to subdue the top martial art experts from the martial art realm. I suspect that they are using some kind of dirty trick or some unconventional way of tricking everyone, maybe some kind of violent poison. They declare blatantly that they are inviting everyone to eat "eight meat gruel".

No one knows that what exactly is this meat gruel but obviously it won't be some green vegetables or plain rice. This theory is actually too simplistic and if some like me can think then obviously all the famous sect leaders and intellectuals also have thought about it and might have gone to island of heroes with all kind of disintoxicating medicines. It is really difficult to think what might have happened but anyone can suffer treachery and it's pretty difficult to avoid it in reality. You are kindhearted in nature, I am sure that god will protect you and the evil doers will face the retribution, my only suggestion is that please be careful."

He remembered the advice of Shi Qing but smelled the dessert's fragrance and thought: "I am really hungry right now and haven't eaten after coming to this island, what good it will be if I don't eat or drink? Zhang San and Li Si are my elder brother and have sworn oath with me of sharing happiness and sorrow. If they harm me, it will be similar to harming themselves."

He immediately started eating spring rolls and steamed cake and different kind of snacks and desserts. He finished them as a whirlwind sweeps away the scattered clouds in one swift motion and also finished the pot of green tea.

After that he sat in that hole for a long time and rested, suddenly he heard the

sound of drums, strings and woodwind instruments. A person arrived at his place and bowed in front of him and said: "Island hosts are inviting Shi Bangzhu to feast." Shi Potian stood up and followed him out of the room.

After passing through several pit holes, he heard the sound of drum and woodwind instruments getting louder and suddenly he saw the entrance of a cave hall, this place was extremely bright. He saw it was a big hall and its center point was filled with the butter candles and around hundred tables were placed in the halls and guests were pouring in the hall from all sides. This hall was really big, although about hundred tables were placed in the hall but still it didn't look crowded. Several hundred men with yellow clothes were shuttling around the hall and guiding the guest to take a seat. All guests were alone and Shi Potian didn't found the island hosts in the hall. After the numerous guests sit down and took their places then the music stopped.

Shi Potian looked around and saw Bai Zizai sitting nearby. His white hair looked dreary but his personality exuded an overwhelming power. He was sitting among numerous heroes but he was a person of high stature and looked distinct from others as if a crane among chickens. That day in stone prison, the light was dim and visibility was obscure and ambiguous, Shi Potian had not looked at his face properly but here at this moment the candlelight casted light upon his face and Shi Potian felt as if "power and virtue gentleman" resembled like a idol in the temple and a bright aura is emanating around him. He looked at him with profound respect and went to him, and said: "Grandpa, I have come!"

Although in the hall, there were numerous people and one has to literally shout to draw attention of everyone but all guests were concerned about their own life and no one was uttering a single word. When Shi Potian suddenly greeted Bai Zizai, everyone turned towards him and looked at him.

Bai Zizai sighed as he saw him and said: "I don't know if you are good or evil, you little rascal, but it's unlikely that I will have a great-grandson now."

Shi Potian was startled for a moment and stood there for half of a day and then only understood that Bai Zizai meant that since he too has come to island of heroes then how can he and A'Xiu have any children, he said: "Grandpa, grandma is waiting for you in that fishing village at the seashore, she said that she will wait for you for three months and if you don't come back before eight

day of third month then she will ...she will throw herself in the sea to commit suicide."

Bai Zizai stroked his long eyebrow and said: "Doesn't she go to Azure Conch Mountain?"

Shi Potian said: "Grandma listened to you saying that and got seriously mad, she scolded youscolded you"

Bai Zizai said: "What did she say?"

Shi Potian said: "She scolded that you are an old lunatic. She said that Ding Busi is a frivolous thief, he has fabricated a rumor to deceive people, this old lunatic's brain is not working anymore and he believed him. Grandma also said that if she saw that Ding Busi then she will use her golden phoenix sword skill to chop his arm and cut his tongue"

Bai Zizai laughed and said: "Good, good, this is so good."

Suddenly they heard the sound of a person sobbing from the corner, he said: "Why did she so scold me? When was I frivolous to her? I was completely sincere to her and never married, sheher heart is actually like an iron stone, she is not even willing to set her foot on the Azure Conch Mountain. "

Shi Potian looked at the person speaking those words. He was obviously Ding Busi. He sat on chair, both his hands on the table, his whole body trembling and thin lines of tears flowing across his face.

Shi Potian heard Bai Zizai saying: "He has also come. He is so old but still crying in the presence of everyone, isn't he shameless?"

Usually if he had cried in front of numerous heroes then the entire group would have ridiculed him but at this moment, each person was aware that they themselves are so close to their death and actually some of them wished in their heart that how good it would have if they all can cry together. Unexpectedly not a single person laughed at him.

In martial art world, the life of famous heroes, sect leaders usually sways back and forth on the tip of sword, "fearing death" these two characters don't have much affect on them however if they are in some duel then they depend on their martial art skills and it does not necessarily means that they are going to lose

and lose their life. This situation was actually entirely different, all them knew perfectly well that once they have arrived at the island of heroes then even if they don't accept the reality but still they won't be leaving alive. The most difficult thing was perhaps the fear of unknown. They knew that no one has returned from this island in last thirty years but no one knew what the cause of their death was and everyone was apprehensive about this situation.

Suddenly they heard a hoarse female voice from the west corner, she sneered and said: "Hmmmm.....What complete sincerity, you actually never married? Ding Busi, you are not concerned about losing your face! You were completely sincere to Shi Xiaocui then why you gave birth to a daughter with my elder sister?"

The complexion of Ding Busi changed to red suddenly. He stood up in distress and asked: "YouYouWho are you? How do you know?"

That female said: "She is my biological elder sister, how would I not know? Did that girl die, tell me....is she alive?"

She leapt to the place where Ding Busi was standing. Unexpectedly the four legs of his chair shook vibrantly and that female asked fiercely: "That girl....is she living? Tell me quickly?"

Ding Busi muttered: "IHow would I know?"

That female said: "When elder sister was at the point of death, she assigned me to find you and find that girl's whereabouts. She wanted me to look after this girl. YouYou are a heartless, cruel smelly thief, you have ruined the life of my elder sister and here you are actually worrying about others' wife."

The face of Ding Busi turned ashen, he felt as if knees are buckling under his weight as if someone has cut off his legs. He sat on the chair dejectedly.

That female said fiercely: "Is that girl alive or dead?"

Ding Busi said: "Twenty years ago, she was alive, afterward I don't know."

That female said: "Why don't you look for her?"

Ding Busi was speechless for a moment, he only said: "ThisThiswas not easy. Some people said that she has arrived at the island of heroes but I

don't know the details."

Shi Potian saw that female was short in height, her face was veiled and he was able to see a thick mourning band. Her appearance did not look clear but she looked strong and ominous. He knew that Ding Busi can kill anyone without batting an eye but unexpectedly he was afraid of her.

The sound of drums and other woodwind instruments again started as a man in yellow clothes came out and said in a clear and resonant voice: "The leaders of the island of heroes, Long Daozhu and Mu Daozhu are appearing in front of honored guest." (***) Daozhu = island master/host)

The heart of numerous guests started palpitating, everybody by this time was aware that the island of heroes has two leaders, one surnamed Long and another surnamed Mu.

The gate opened and two rows of men and women came. The one on the right side were in yellow cloths and the one on left-hand side color puts on blue.

That person continued with his ritual and called out: "Long Daozhu and Mu Daozhu and numerous disciples welcome the distinguished guests."

They saw that the two envoys of command of reward and punishment were also standing among these two rows of people. Zhang San had put on yellow clothes and was placed on the right hand side on eleventh position and Li Si had put on blue clothes and was placed on the left-hand side on thirteenth position in the row of twenty people.

The people cannot help but sucked in cold air. The martial arts of Zhang San and Li Si were incomparable in the martial art world and everybody had personally seen it and they thought: "No wonder no one came from this island of heroes in last thirty years. Not to mention the other people, these two people can single handedly get rid of numerous heroes in the central plains and have become a famous characters. No one even managed to fight twenty moves with them and these are just two of the followers?"

These two rows of disciples respectively took there place and respectfully bowed to salute the numerous heroes. Everyone hurriedly returned the greetings. Sometime back Zhang San and Li Si were roaming in the central plains and inviting people and presenting them with bronze medal, murdered people

and even slaughtered the entire sects but at this moment after they have returned to the island, unexpectedly they did look respectful and prudent.

Amidst a fine tune of music, two old men came in shoulder to shoulder in the hall; one was wearing yellow and another blue.

That person announcing called out loudly: "The island hosts welcome the honored guest for their presence." Long Daozhu and Mu Daozhu bowed and then clasped their fist in their hand to greet everyone and the numerous heroes too returned their greetings.

That person surnamed Long smiled and said: "I and Brother Mu live in this out-of-the-way desert island, today we are fortunate to see so many heroes and feel really honored. Above in the desert island, various things are crude and we did not receive you cordially, please accept our apology for it." his voice was really gentle and by his accent he looked like a person from the central plains.

Mu Daozhu said: "Everyone, please take your seats." His pronunciation was really sharp and his accent resembled to one from Fujian area.

After numerous guests took their seat, Long Daozhu and Mu Daozhu too took their seat on the west side of the hall. The numerous disciples actually did not take any seat and relaxed but still kept standing.

Numerous guests thought in their heart: "These people from the island of heroes are really overbearing, if the visitor does not come then they kill his whole family or sect but after we have arrived in the island, their etiquette is actually really thorough. These are hypocritical people." Some thought: "We are prisoners anyway, what difference it makes if they give us poison in food or decapitate us."

The people looked at the two island hosts; the complexion of Long Daozhu was a bit white and a bit red, as if like a child. On the other hand Mu Daozhu was of dark complexion with and his face was actually full of wrinkles. No one was actually able to guess how old are they, they could have been anywhere between sixty to ninety but if someone told them that they are hundred years old then still it won't be unbelievable.

As various people took their seat, numerous servants came out immediately and started pouring out wine and serving cooked food. On everyone's table,

there were four plates, four bowls, eight different kinds of delicacies, chicken, meat, fish and shrimp and the food smelled really appetizing.

Once Shi Potian settled down on his eat, he looked around in all direction. He saw several recognizable faces in the hall, the Taoist from ShanQing temple, Fan Yifei from the Guangdong along with Lu Zhengping and Gao San Niangzi had also arrived. They all were actually frightened and didn't say any words to Shi Potian but simply nodded and silently greeted him.

The two island hosts held their wine cup and said: "Please!" and started drinking wine.

The numerous heroes saw that the wine had a glossy look and was of pale purple color. It was really cold and had a very nice aroma but people thought in their heart: "Who knows what kind of a fierce poison is in this wine." Most of them raised their glasses and touched to their lips but no one actually drank the wine.

Only a small number of people thought: "The opposite party can harm me with a slight effort, what if this wine has some poison, even if one dies then at least die drinking this good wine." They raised their glass to drink up immediately; the servants were all on their heels and filled the cup as soon as it was empty.

After the two island hosts drank the wine for about three rounds, Long Daozhu raised his left hand to signal. Immediately a group of servants came in the hall with large bowls. Each bowl was full of some kind of gruel and they placed it in front of every guest separately.

The numerous guests thought: "So this is the famous "Eight meat gruel" ... everyone knows in the martial art realm." They saw hot vapor coming out of gruel, small bubbles coming up from bottom, the color of the gruel was deep green color and it looked a bit strange however one was unable to say what actually is weird about it. The original meat gruel is made up of red jujube, husked lotus, and red bean and so on but at present in this gruel, the vegetable does not look like the vegetable but some kind of a grass and the gruel was extremely thickly. The various masters knew that the poison normally assumes the dark green color, this bowl of gruel was also deep green and also the smell of the gruel was really irritating to the nose and it felt like some kind of medicated

gruel.

Gao San Niangzi smelled a whiff and was scared in her heart. She thought who knows was kind of a poisonous snakes, centipede, spider and scorpion are inside this boiling gruel and felt like vomiting. As the person carrying the bowl of gruel came near her table, she extended her sleeve to cover up her nose.

Long Daozhu said: "I am honored that each one of you has traveled such a distance to come to this banquet. Actually this bowl of meat gruel is very rare and you won't find it anywhere else. It is actually prepared from "broken heart eclipse bone spoiled heart grass". This grass is really rare and it blooms in to flower and separate from its grass once in every ten years. This is why we wait for ten years to invites the leaders from the martial art realm after every ten years. He counted on his fingers and said that this is the fourth such invitation. Please, please, do not be polite." As he was saying these words, he and Mu Daozhu took the bowl of gruel in their left hand and lifted the chopsticks from their right hand and invite everyone.

The people heard the name "broken heart eclipse bone spoiled heart grass" and were shocked in their heart. Although after arriving in the island, everybody had not planned that they will depart alive but the name of this herb which was used to make this meat gruel was soul-stirring and unexpectedly this Long Daozhu promulgated it such blatantly, they cannot help but the complexion of everyone turned pale.

They only saw the two island hosts Mu Daozhu and Long Daozhu lifting their chopsticks and hinting everyone to start eating then lifted their bowl to eat.

The numerous guests thought: "In your two bowls of gruel, you might have put ginseng and bird's nest or some tonic...who knows."

Suddenly a person stood on the eastern end and pointed at the two island hosts loudly: "Surnamed Long, surnamed Mu listen, I, Xie Wenbao arrived at the island of heroes and already assumed that I am dead but I have an indomitable spirit and I am an honest man. If you have to kill then you must hack but how can someone surnamed Mu wrinkle his frowns and wants me to eat this dirty poison, I won't!"

Long Daozhu was surprised, he said with a smile: "If the hero is not inclined to

eat the gruel then how dare do we force you to do so? Actually why are you losing your temper? Please sit."

Xie Wenbao shouted loudly: "I surnamed Wenbao is not afraid to die...one dies early or late what difference does it make, everyone dies in the end but you people are bent on insulting everyone of us. I won't accept this disrespect!" As he was saying these words he took the bowl of hot gruel and threw it at the island hosts.

Suddenly an old man sitting two tables away from Xie Wenbao stood up and shouted: "Xie my worthy brother, don't play rough!" He stroked his gown sleeves and sent out a strong breeze, the bowl of gruel was stopped in the mid-air. That bowl of gruel was no longer moving forward but kind of hung in the air for moment and then started falling downwards. Everyone thought that it was going to falls on that mosaic floor and gruel will be splashed everywhere however the servant pouring wine suddenly slanted his body vertically and bent his waist and stretched out his arm. He was just in time to lift-off the bowl about several inches from ground.

The numerous guests couldn't restrain themselves and cheered him loudly: "well done!"

Just and the sound of applause died, everyone was deeply worried and they thought: "If the person who is waiting tables and is a lowly servant is so skillful then how can we even think of living this place alive?"

Various people were perturbed in their heart by this incident, some started thinking of their descendants and family; Some were thinking of their old enmity; Some thought that at least even if one person is dying, their sect and families are safe, on the other hand some people deeply regretted their decision to come to island of heroes and thought that perhaps it would have been better if they would have hidden in some remote mountain. Some people always thought that they have been really fortunate in life and will find some way to avoid this calamity once they are in the island of the heroes but after watching a servant so exceptionally skill, even they too lost the hope of overpowering the island host and escaping.

A middle-aged person with a demeanor of a scholar stood up and called out:

"The servants of the island hosts are skillful; they can easily defeat the heroes in the central plains. If the two islands hosts want the martial arts world to rule then it will be as easy as pie. I don't understand why have we all gathered here? When I came to this island then I already knew that I won't return back from this island but I am having this doubt in my heart for such a long time and it will be great injustice if I die without knowing the truth. The two island hosts, please enlightening me and open this mental block, this question is bugging me down to death."

Actually everyone in that hall was having the same thoughts but no one spoke these words because they thought other will think of him as inferior but deep in their heart they were now anxious to hear the answer. They all looked at the two island hosts with great anticipation.

Long Daozhu said with a smile: "'West gate lives first' does not need to be too modest."

As soon as the numerous guests listened these words, they all turned their head to look that that scholarly person as if by prior agreement and thought: "Is this the same person who shocked the martial art world about 20 years ago, "the west region scholar" or "west region acme of perfection"? Looking at him, he doesn't look more than 40 years old but more than 20 years ago, he killed the seven tyrants of North Shanxi by his palm and incited the eight stockades of the Hubei region within three days. However he was already about 40 at that time but he still looked the same age so people were really confused if this is the same person or not but they were unaware that there was someone else in the martial art world with the same name and also with the same scholarly look."

They only heard Long Daozhu saying: "West region scholar", you had executed seven tyrants with your palm and the eight strongholds" (Everyone thought: so he is the same person) ".....I and brother Mu have admired you for such a long time; we don't dare to be impolite."

The west region scholar said: "Does not dare; that was way back in the past and was such a minor matter. I might have flaunted crazily in the central plains for a while but here it will be a similar to a novices trick in front of island hosts."

Long Daozhu said: "West gate lived first is too modest. Your Excellency asked

just now that what are the desires of us two people, I will explain to you but first you have to start eating this gruel of 'broken heart eclipse bone spoiled heart grass' while it is hot. Everybody please first sip the gruel and then I will tell in detail."

Shi Potian listened to these two people talking politely and using numerous idioms, he didn't understand half of them but he was getting hungry and was suppressing it for some time. Once the gruel was served in front of him, he wanted to start eating but waited for others to do so. However once Long Daozhu said to start eating then he immediately took the gruel bowl and started eating. At first the smell of the gruel was really irritating him but once he put the gruel in his mouth, it wasn't as bad and in fact he liked it and immediately finished off the bowl upside down.

Some people thought: "This boy does not know the immensity of heaven and earth, this person flaunts his temporary boldness and looks like a stubborn person. He will be soon knocking the Gate of Death if he continues to do so."

Some thought: "Anyway we are going to die, at least this young hero is not afraid, and he is like a fresh breeze in this closed underground hall."

Bai Zizai cheered: "Wonderful! Husband of my granddaughter from snow mountain sect is not ordinary." He still thought that his sect was the best sect among all the various sects in this world. So he mentioned Shi Potian and his sect both in the same line.

When Bai Zizai left the Ling Xiao city after fighting with Grandma Shi, he was deeply frustrated. He believed these words his entire life: "the leader of the snow mountain sect 'power and virtue gentleman' is easily the best swordsman in the world through the ages, his internal strength is the best, his skills in the concealed weapons is the best, he is a big hero and chivalrous person, a great master of profound learning and integrity".

When he saw the skill of the servant who was simply pouring wine, at first he too was amazed but then thought perhaps these people have deliberately planted a high martial art exponent in disguise of servant and it might not be necessarily true that the martial art of island of heroes is best in the world.

He saw Shi Potian does not caring about the poison in the gruel and said

"Husband of my granddaughter from snow mountain sect" and was quite self-satisfied by him and the heroic spirit rushed in his heart too. He also took the gruel bowl immediately and started eating it and finished it in flash.

He thought: "All the people in this hall did not dare to eat this gruel, only I and this boy have the courage to eat it, what kind of a heroic people are these fellows?" But he immediately remembered: "I am the second person of who has eaten this gruel, even if I am a heroic person still I am actually the world second greatest. They should remove the characters "big hero" from my title. He cannot help but was again greatly depressed and thought: "Since after eating this poisonous gruel, anyway we are going to die so why not drink first and die? Now since I have become the "world's second best", it's actually is quite dull."

He was lost in his own thought and regrets and didn't hear the words of Long Daozhu.

Long Daozhu said: "About forty years ago, I and brother Mu became friends, we wanted to collaborate in the martial art realm to punish the wicked and help the good people but unexpectedly we have to leave martial art realm. We actually discovered a map; in that map there were the details and location of a nameless desert island and an earthshaking martial art secret"

Xie Wenbao inserted with a sneer: "This obviously was island of heroes, how can it be a nameless desert island?"

The old man who has flicked his sleeve to keeps off the gruel bowl shouted: "Brother Xie, Please don't break the thread of conversation of Long Daozhu."

Xie Wenbao said resentfully: "You are desperate to flatter; he will not necessarily forgive your life."

That old man got angry and took the bowl of meat gruel and ate it in one breath. Once he completed the bowl, he said: "Your and I have crossed each other for half a lifetime, do you still remember when you used to call Zheng Guangzhi elder brother?"

Xie Wenbao said with great regret: "Eldest brother, I have made a mistake; little brother will accompany you to nether world."

He knelt down immediately and kowtowed in front of him thrice and then took

the bowl of meat gruel from the table and finished it off in one breath. Zheng Guangzhi came and hugged him and said: "Brother, you and I became sworn brothers in the past; we swore that we were not born on same month and same day in the same year but will die on same month and same day in the same year. This vow actually is really difficult to fulfill but today we get the opportunity, at least our vow was not in vain."

Two people embraced each other and were actually both happy and also sad at the same time and burst into tears.

Shi Potian heard him saying that "we were not born on same month and same day in the same year but will die on same month and same day in the same year" and cannot restrain himself and looked at Zhang San and Li Si.

Zhang San and Li Si looked at each other to smile and then turned their head towards the island hosts. Long Daozhu and Mu Daozhu nodded slightly. Zhang San and Li Si both carried a bowl of meat gruel and went to Shi Potian and said: "Brother, please!"

Shi Potian hurriedly said: "No, no! Two elder brothers, you do not need to accompany me with dying. I only ask you to look after A'Xiu....."

Zhang San said with a smile: "Brother, we swore brotherhood; we said that day that we will share happiness and sorrow together so actually we are lucky to be here with you too. You had already eaten the meat gruel; we are the elder brother so how can we not eat it?" As he was saying these words, Zhang San and Li Si both started eating bowl of meat gruel respectively. After they finished the gruel, they turned around and bowed to the two island host and then returns to their original ranks.

The numerous guests saw Zhang San and Li Si to worry about Shi Potian and as a sworn brother accompanying Shi Potian to eat the gruel and were really shocked. They understood however that it was really difficult to outrun the predestined time of death and after watching Zheng Guangzhi and Xie Wenbao reconciling.

Bai Zizai thought: "The character of these two people envoys of Command and punishment can be said as variant. If my sworn brothers have taken some violent poison then would I have worried about the righteousness of vow to my sworn

brother and would I have accompanied him to his death?" As he thought these words, he cannot help but felt great hesitation and confusion regarding what he might have done.

Suddenly he thought: "Since I have this moment of hesitation, even if I finally decide to die still those words "big chivalrous person"...these three characters should be removed from my title...what a shame."

They only heard Zhang San saying: "Brother, here some guest do not like the taste of this eight meat gruel probably, if you like then you may even eat several bowls." Shi Potian was a person of good appetite and was hungry for half of the day; a bowl of meat gruel was insufficient to satisfy his hunger so he thought that he has already eaten one bowl, what's the harm in eating some more so he looked around for people offering him more gruel.

Nearby several people saw him looking for gruel and hurriedly came to him carrying their bowl. Someone said: "This gruel smell is too nauseous, I cannot drink. Young hero, please eat it, this way our host will also won't feel bad." They saw with their own eyes that Shi Potian stretched his pair of hands and took a bowl. People were afraid that Zhang San might renege on his words and they will lose this good opportunity so they hurriedly put the gruel bowl on the table of Shi Potian.

Shi Potian said: "Many thanks!" he took two bowls and finished it off in one go.

Long Daozhu smiled and nodded, he said: "Brother Xie has said well, on the map that nameless desert island was indeed this island of heroes however the name of island of heroes was given to it by me and Brother Mu once we arrived in the island. It was a little arrogant of us to two people to overstep one's authority and posing as heroes but there is another reason which you will know later. We followed the instructions in the map and searched for this location and finally after 18 days we managed to find that martial art secret. Originally this martial art was in form of some ancient poetic verses and pictorial illustrations; the meaning was extremely abstruse and profound. We two brothers were extremely glad and didn't care much and started practicing according to the pictorial illustrations."

"Oh! How can we know that our good fortune turned to disaster? We two

people studied for several months but our martial art showed no improvement and we had certain disagreement. I said that we should follow one method to practice and Brother Mu thought that my idea has some flaw and should practice in some other way. We two people argued for several days and it was pretty hard to convince the opposite party throughout, so we agreed to disagree and immediately started practicing separately and thought that we will verify afterwards who is right and who is wrong. After having practiced more than half a year, we two people begin to doubt our approach, whenever we were looking for solutions, it actually led to another question and much to the amazement of we two peopleactually....actually...."

He spoke in a very low voice and in a very low-spirited tone and stopped talking. Mu Daozhu sighed and looked at him but didn't say anything.

After a long period of time, Long Daozhu said: "Originally we two people practiced incorrectly!"

The numerous guests listened these words and were shocked. They thought that the martial art of their apprentice Zhang San and Li Si is so high so naturally they might also have superb martial art skills. Various people were already familiar with the amazing internal strength of these two envoys so they were expecting that the internal energy of both island hosts would be immeasurably deep. The study of internal energy is a lot different from normal martial art involving palm and feet, if there is a slight mistake then the person will suffer severe injury. The more the profound internal strength, the result would be more disastrous for even a small mistake, a person can immediately get killed.

They only listened to the Long Daozhu saying: "We two people detected the mistake but didn't stopped practicing right away and debated the analysis mutually to study truth. The intelligence of us two people too bad, after some time we were not able to properly understand the pictorial illustrations too as those illustrations were far too abstruse, We studied diligently again for several months relentlessly.

In this time, some pirate ship drifted in towards this island, my brother and I killed three bandit chiefs. We conducted separate trials and executed all the evil doers on the ship one by one and coerced other people on the ship to stay in the island.

We also discussed that since we are only following the pictorial illustrations but are not studying the ancient poetic verses so we might need some help to understand this martial art skill. We were now practicing for two years, as they say the first impressions are most lasting. We thought that we have made a mistake to consider only the pictorial illustrations but ignoring the poetic verses so we decided to receive several disciples and let them think. We both selected six disciples from the people in ship who were literate and intelligent by mental disposition but with average martial art skills. We taught them separately but didn't pass on the internal strength knowledge but directed their skill at swordsmanship and then sent them to study the poetic verses.

Afterwards the three disciples of mine and the three disciple of Brother Mu studied those verses and came back and told about their meaning. There was no doubt among those people that all of them gave similar explanations. We two people discussed again carefully that this pictorial illustrations and came to conclusion that these have been based on Li Taibai's ancient poetry. We are the uncouthly people from martial art realm and have limited knowledge of literature and were much inferior to the well-versed scholars who are skilled in the poetry and art. It came to our understanding that to understand this martial art, one has to be proficient in not only martial art skills but also in literary skills. Therefore I and Brother Mu came to the central plains and spent one year here and receives four disciples respectively. Each one of them was well versed with the poetry books and was Confucian scholars, perhaps had some poetic talent or was famous *littérateur*."

He pointed at the 7-8 disciples standing in black cloths and said: "I have to pretty candid about the fact that if these disciples took an examination, then it would be as easy as a pie for them to get selected for the Hanlin academy (academic and administrative institution founded in eighth century Tang dynasty, these were elite group of scholars, who performed secretarial and literary tasks for the court).

In the beginning when they arrives at the island of heroes, they were is not necessarily forced to study martial art skills too but they studied martial art also to get better understanding of the verses and illustrations and have wholeheartedly remained here. They thought that studying martial arts is by far better

then serving as an official."

Numerous guests listened to him saying: "Studying martial arts is by far better than serving as an official" and couldn't agree more to his words and nodded at the same.

Long Daozhu also said: "But these eight famous litterateur have all come from different family backgrounds and places and after going through the verses and illustrations they all had different insights. I and brother Mu actually discussed these different theories but we were not convinced and couldn't agree on any one approach conclusively and instead we two people got more and more confused.

"We were unable to find a way to understand and properly identify our next step and were extremely worried. If we decide to abandon and let it go then all these effort would be wasted.

Suddenly Brother Mu had an idea, he said: "In the martial art world, whenever people speak of the essence of martial art study, they always look up to the leader of the Shaolin temple, wondrous truth master, why not we ask him to come to advice?"

I said: "The wondrous truth master lives in seclusion for tens of years and don't take much interest in the worldly affair, I am afraid that he will accept our invitation."

Brother Mu said: Why not we transcribe those twelve illustrations and deliver to Shaolin Temple and ask him to glance? If the wondrous truth master ignores then also that place is good enough for that illustrations and we don't have to be afraid that it will fall in wrong hands and we brothers do not need to pay attention to this nuisance again."

I said: "This idea is great; we might as well make two copies and deliver it to Mt. Wudang to Taoist priest Yu Chadao. Shaolin and Wudang are the most famous two schools of martial art in the realm and it go without saying that these two are the most skilled people currently in the martial art realm and their distinguished opinion might be really helpful."

"We two people drew the replica of poetic verses and pictorial illustrations; we drew the pictorial illustrations in first chart and nearby copied the verses and

made sure not to omit a single word and went to deliver these to Shaolin Temple personally.

As I was quite honest earlier too that we were extremely glad when we two people discovered this ancient poetry and pictorial illustrations and only wanted to study ourselves. We wouldn't have even considered to share this secret with even a third person in the martial art world but the more we studied the more we got engrossed and even after relentless efforts we were not able to understand it so we made up mind to go to Shaolin Temple with this rare book. We actually reached to a position that we were ready to share the book with the entire world only if someone can solve this enigma.

After we reached Shaolin Temple, I and Brother Mu sealed that book in an envelope and asked the monk in charge of reception of visitors to submit it to the wondrous truth master. In the beginning that monk was not willing. He said that the wondrous truth master is living in seclusion for many years and we do not send any message to him from bystanders. We two people then respectively took the futon and blocked the Shaolin Temple's front door and sat there for seven days and seven nights and did not let the Buddhist priest to come in and go out. The monk in charge of reception of visitors was helpless and finally agreed to hand over that letter."

The numerous guests thought: "He said these words pretty lightly but blocking the front entrance of Shaolin Temple for seven days and nights is seriously easier said than done? In this period who knows they would have passed through many fierce struggles with several highly skilled opponents. The Shaolin monks were unable to drive out them so they agreed to give his letter."

Long Daozhu continued and said: "After that monk in charge of reception of visitors received the envelope, we stood up and left Shaolin Temple and waited in a small inn near the mountain foot. We have not waited for even a half hour when wondrous truth master rushed in and only asked: "where?"

Brother Mu said: "We must also to another person."

The wondrous truth master said: "good, then lets us get Yu Chadao!"

"Three people arrived on Mt. Wudang, the wondrous truth master said: "I am the Shaolin Temple's wondrous truth, I have to see Taoist priest Yu Chadao."

They do not have to wait for the notification and rushed in. the reputation of the Shaolin Temple's wondrous truth master was such that no Wudang disciples dared to detain. We two people followed after him. The wondrous truth master arrived in the room and immediately opened that manual and gave it to the Taoist priest. Yu Chadao looked at the pictorial illustrations and then the poetic verses and did not say a word and then turned around to walk. We were pleasantly surprised by this behavior of Taoist priest Yu Chadao and we all came back to island of heroes.

Wondrous truth master was adept in Shaolin martial arts and all sort of unsurpassed artistries, Yu Chadao wielded the sword like a god, these two were apex characters in the martial arts world and everyone recognized them. They arrived in the island and then started studying the verses and illustrations. In the first month, they mostly had same ideas with some minor differences but by second month the difference started growing significantly. By the third month, the situation actually went out of control and these two highly skilled master actually had a big dispute over the interpretation of the illustrations and verses and eveneven, oh! It began unexpectedly."

The various guests were all surprised and then someone asked: "Did these two people of great martial art skills decided to resolve their dispute by a duel...who actually won and who was defeated?"

Long Daozhu said: "Wondrous truth master and Taoist priest Yu Chadao both used their own understanding of the verses and illustrations to fight. They fought up to fifth move and realized that they are actually using similar moves but from sixth moves onwards there were subtle differences. So sometimes they fought and then rested and again fight. This went on for several months and the two people kept on reading the verses and illustrations and fought using their interpretation. Sometimes they both used similar moves and some times there were startling difference however it is pretty difficult for us two brothers to say who was better or inferior.

I and Brothers Mu discussed in detail and came to conclusion that this martial art is broad and profound, it was so difficult for even the wondrous truth master and Taoist Yu Chadao to understand and master this skill so we should contact people of high martial art skills and ask them to look at these verses and

illustration and try to comprehend the meaning. As the saying goes "Three smelly tanners can surpass Zhuge Liang". We should invite the numerous heroes from the martial art realm who was well versed in different skills and will ask them to look at these.

In the meantime we found that this "broken heart eclipse bone spoiled heart grass" had blossomed exactly at that time. If this grass is used properly and mixed with proper herbs and then cooked down as a hot gruel then it benefits the martial art exponent greatly therefore we sent two people as our envoy to invite the famous masters of the sects and schools to come to this island of heroes and request them to help us to found the solution and interpret the meaning of these verse and illustration and also to eat the meat gruel. Once they have eaten the gruel then I ask them to have a look at the verses and give their views."

As he said these words, various people looked at each other in blank dismay, half believing and half doubting and the complexion of everyone look totally confused.

For half of the day no one said anything then Ding Busi asked loudly: "So it means that you have really invited everyone to eat the meat gruel and your intension was pure and good."

Long Daozhu said: "To say that our intension is good is not necessarily true. I and brother Mu are a bit selfish in our heart, we only hope that the great martial art experts from numerous sects and schools can give their insight and help us solve this puzzle which is bugging our life for such a long time and also help to put the study of martial art to the next level but if you mean that we have any intension to hurt any one of numerous honored guest then please be at ease. We certainly have no such intension."

Ding Busi sneered and said: "How can you say these kinds of words in front of everyone and believe that you can deceive people just like that? If a person doesn't accept your invitation to come to eat this gruel and help you study this martial art secret then why do you kill those people? You not only kill them but kill their entire family or even the entire sect. Do you think that this is your way of treating people in such an overbearing manner exudes your good intension?

Long Daozhu nodded and clapped twice. He said: "Bring the account books of Command of reward and punishment."

Then eight disciples came inside the hall and everyone held a pack of account books, each pack was at least two feet high.

Long Daozhu said: "Distribute it among the honored guests." The numerous disciples took the account books and delivered it to various heroes. The name of some sects or school was written on the top of each account books.

Ding Busi looked at one book and saw the characters written on top "The Ding family". He cannot help but was startled in his heart and thought: "The movement of us brothers is really unusual, this island of heroes is such out-of-way desert island, totally isolated from the martial art realm, how are they aware of so much news about our family."

He turned over the pages and saw the notes that on some day on some month on some year Ding Busan had done this thing and on some day on some month on some year Ding Busi had done that. Although it didn't covered everything but still all the big and significant incidents of their life in past 20 years was captured in the book.

A stream of sweat started streamed across him as Ding Busi looked at his book, he stole a glance and looked at other people, in fact everyone was looking distressed and everyone's complexion turned pale. Only Shi Potian was still eating more gruel and did not pay any attention to the book which had "Clan of eternal happiness" inscribed in its front, actually no one knew about his character at all so nothing was written regarding him.

Long Daozhu suddenly said: "So everyone is enjoying the account books of the Command of reward and punishment." The disciples took back the account books separately.

Long Daozhu said with a smile: "My brother sends some of his subordinates to inquire about the news in the martial art world. By no means are they prying in our friends' privacy but whatever they learn, they simply write it down. Every single person or school or sects who are exterminated by the island of heroes is guilty of the most heinous crime and no one can say that he doesn't deserve it. Although we do not dare to say that we are enforcing the justice on behalf of

Heaven, however the right or wrong and good or evil is ascertain and then only we act.

I and Brother Mu already live in this island of heroes; the actions we take must always be to do the right thing and should protect the integrity of the character "Hero". We only hate that the island of heroes is limited and we cannot completely execute the evil person in all over the world. Everybody please carefully remember when we have killed a sect or a family who were good and chivalrous people and upheld justice. Just because we have sent the bronze medal invitation to you doesn't mean that island of heroes wants to exterminate you too."

People remained silent for half of the day and nobody answered.

Long Daozhu said: "Therefore we kill the people then actually this is the punishment which he deserves"

Bai Zizai sneered and said suddenly: "In Tongzhou, Hebei province, Master pugilist Nie Laozi was not wicked person, why did you kill his whole family?"

Long Daozhu extracts a book and threw it towards Bai Zizai gently and said: "Power and virtue gentleman please look." That notebook flew to Bai Zizai really slowly. Bai Zizai puts out his hand as soon as he threw but unexpectedly that account book suddenly crashed fiercely just a couple of two feet in front of his fingers.

Bai Zizai put out a hand to hurriedly catch account book before it fell on the gruel bowl and made a hash of catching a book. Once he got the account books suddenly it dawned to him that: "This person shoots a several pages thick book such conveniently, the incoming speed is really slow but the strength and vigor is extremely unpleasant and unpredictable. They should also remove the words "skills in the concealed weapons are the best" from my title. The skill of these people is really as in fables, the so-called "fly to attack the enemy, to pick the leaf to offend somebody" things are achieved by them. The strength of hand and the projection speed of concealed weapon are pretty difficult to judge and to evade."

He saw the words "Nie family from Hebei, Tongzhou" and turned on the pages. He was shocked to learn that "On second day of fifth month, Nie Zongtai raped

and killed two people in Cangzhou and shifted the blame on black tiger stronghold bandits and thieves". Another incident was mentioned in other paged: "On seventeenth day of tenth month, Nie Zongfeng wounded the eldest son of official Liu Wen in the Jinan province and on the same night killed the entire 13 people of the Liu family to eliminate a potential informant." Nie Zongtai and Nie Zongfeng are the sons of Nie Laozi and he was aware of these incidents but he unexpectedly did not tried to stop them or told anyone about these incidents.

Bai Zizai hesitated and said: "These matters can't be verified, I did not know that if it is really false or true. I do not dare saying that two hosts are intentionally slaughtering the innocents but I am afraid that in some instances the disciples of island of heroes might have listened to wrong criticism or information also."

Zhang San said suddenly: "Power and virtue gentleman does not believe then please have a look at this thing." As he was saying these words, he turned around and came back immediately, raised his right hand and threw an account books to Bai Zizai. The account book flew to him and dipped at the last moment just as earlier but Bai Zizai was ready for this and noted that his technique and Long Daozhu was not different. He puts out a hand to take up and obtained the book but felt that the power with which he has thrown the book was much less compared to Long Daozhu.

Bai Zizai and Nie Laozi were well acquainted in their youth and he recognized the handwriting immediately, he saw that this book was really in Nie Laozi's own handwriting and had records of several of his monetary communications and on the top of it were written characters "may kill", this account was: "On 8th bought the 83 Chinese acres of land in Zhoujia Village at the price 72."

Bai Zizai thought: "This much money must have bought only about 80 Chinese acres of fields, this field was bought too cheaply, had he used some kind of intimidation or influence to buy in such cheap rates."

He also looked at another account, on its top were "has been possible to kill" written, the account was: "on 15th, received 2520 silvers from the Tongzhou magistrate."

Bai Zizai thought: "Nie Laozi was a chivalrous person from martial art world, why is he receiving money from the government authorities', was he colluding with the corrupt officials, he gave the impression that he was kindhearted but was making dishonorable deals."

He turned over the page with "may kill" these two characters written over more than 50-60 pages, he understood that this red ink two characters were information obtained by Zhang San or Li Si and cannot help but closed the book and said with a deep sigh: "One can be intimate to a person but cannot understand what is underneath the surface! This Nie Laozi was killed deservedly. If I surnamed Bai would have seen this book earlier that even if island of heroes might have shown mercy to him but I would have killed his entire family."

As he said these words he stood but and went to the envoys of Command of reward and punishment and held the book by both hands and said: "Admires, really admires!"

He turned his head to look at both island hosts and admired their sentiment and thought in his heart: "the people from island of heroes are not only outstanding in martial arts but their conduct is also thorough and they uphold the justice. Although I don't know much about the rewarding the punishment but punishing the wicked will be entirely appropriate for me too. Although my snow mountain sect has numerous disciples but I don't have a single disciple who is as talented as Zhang San or Li Si... Oh..."big master of great learning and integrity" these three characters should also be removed from my title or I will be ashamed for the rest of my life."

Long Daozhu understood that Bai Zizai is ashamed to voice his concern about Nie family so he said with a smile: "Power and virtue gentleman, please sit down. You have been in the western region for such a long time and had not been aware of this beast in human's clothing and other incidents in central plains, it's not really surprising."

Bai Zizai nodded and returned back to his place.

Ding Busi said loudly: "This means that island of heroes have killed all the people in past couple of dozen of years, they all deserve the punishment and the one who accepted the invitation were only invited to study and interpret this big

martial art secret."

Long Daozhu nodded and said: "Yes!"

Ding Busi said: "Why is it then the heroes who have arrived to the island of the heroes have not unexpectedly returned home? There is not a shred of information about their well being. It is said that they are all dead."

Long Daozhu shook his and said: "Master Ding this is funny! You have heard some kind of a roadside rumor, how can you completely believe it?"

Ding Busi said: "According to Long Daozhu, then these martial arts exponents are all alive and haven't died? Ha...ha, its laughable... laughable."

Long Daozhu also had a good laugh and said: "Ha...ha, laughable... laughable?"

Ding Busi asked: "Why are you laughing?"

Long Daozhu said with a smile: "Master Ding is my island's honored guest. If master Ding said that something is laughable then I have to agree with him, isn't it?"

Ding Busi said: "In 30 years, about 200-300 people might have arrived at island of heroes to eat that meat gruel, Long Daozhu said unexpectedly that they were still in good health, how could it not be laughable?"

Long Daozhu said: "Mortal people all have a natural lifespan; the predestined time of death can't be altered. I didn't say that nobody died but what I meant was that no one was killed by people in island of heroes."

Ding Busi didn't think much and asked hurriedly: "I actually want to inquire about a person who it is said came to island of heroes. Some female named named Fanggu, I heard about 20 years ago that she arrived in the island of heroes, is she in good health?"

Long Daozhu said: "What is this female's surname? How old is she? Is she the leader of some sect or school?"

Ding Busi said: "Surname.....That I do not know...maybe surnamed Ding"

That woman with veiled face squawked and said: "Is his natural daughter. This girl may be with Ding surname or she might be with her mother's surname, she might be called Mei Fanggu."

The face of Ding Busi turned red and he said: "Heh heh, surnamed Mei ... surnamed Mei, actually I don't have much information about hersheShe might be roughly 40 years old"

That female said in sharp voice: "What roughly 40 years old? She is 39 years old."

Ding Busi said: "Good, good, she is 39 years old. She is not the leader of any sect or school but she had studies the plum blossom fist, in fact is the first disciple of plum blossom fist and I reckon she might have come to island of heroes."

Mu Daozhu shook his head and said: "Plum blossom fist? No... no...she doesn't have the necessary qualifications."

That woman with veiled face said in sharp voice: "Why doesn't plum blossom fist have the qualifications? IHasn't I received your invitation for this feast and those bronze medals?"

Mu Daozhu shook his head and said: "You didn't get the invitation for the plum blossom fist."

Long Daozhu said: "Mei Nuzi, my brother Mu is usually very succinct and does not talks a lot...you can say he is a bit inarticulate. He meant that we have not invited you to the island of heroes for you family's plum blossom fist but because of you're the set of swordsmanship which you have newly created in past two years."

That woman surnamed Mei asked: "My newly created swordsmanship, nobody has seen it yet, how did you know?" her voice was very incisively grating, her tone was coarse and was really uncomfortable for the listeners.

Long Daozhu showed a faint smile and pointed at two disciples. One disciple was in yellow clothes and other in dark green clothes stepped forward immediately and bowed in front of him.

Long Daozhu said: "You two, give a demonstration of this new set of swordsmanship created by Mei Nuzi and why do not ask her for pointers."

Two disciples said: "Yes."

They went near to the empty space close to the wall. The person in yellow clothes took out an iron sword; the person in dark green clothes took out a soft whip. The one in yellow clothes bowed in front of Mei Nuzi and said: "Mei Nuzi, please instruct in case I make a mistake."

He immediately took the posture and then started making various vertical and horizontal strikes. In the hall various heroes from the martial art world had seen all kinds of martial art techniques and fights. The moves of the person in the dark green cloths looked familiar but one in yellow cloths was using some unusual moves and a new set of swordsmanship.

That female does not find it that amusing and said: "This may be wonderful... this may be wonderful! When you do peep?"

Shi Potian looked at several moves and thought: "This person in yellow clothes is good but is that person in dark green clothes is using the Jinlong whip technique of Ding Busi grandpa"

At the same moment he heard the sound of Ding Busi: "Hey....you created this set of swordsmanship to counter my Jinlong whip technique, what was your intention?"

That person in dark green cloths was indeed using the Jinlong whip technique but his every gesture and attack was restrained by the person in yellow cloths using the sword technique of Mei Nuzi. That woman with veiled face sneered but did not reply.

Ding Busi got angrier and shouted loudly: "you wanted to create a sword technique to counter my Jinlong whip technique, I am afraid you failed."

As he spoke these words, he saw the person in yellow clothes using the sword made a very cunningly and strange move, it was menacing and at the same time ruthless, a little crass and of low quality, certainly does not resemble the grace of any famous expert or style.

Ding Busi called out: "Nonsense, nonsense! What kind of swordsmanship is that? Bah, this is the vixen swordsmanship." In his heart cannot help but was secretly startled: "If the opposite party uses this kind of moves then he was afraid that he will be in difficult position." However this kind of a move was sinister strategic move and actually can only be used as a sneak attack and is not

suitable for uprightly and fair fights; although under his heart Ding Busi was surprised but was actually also secretly happy and thought: "This kind of sneak attack is a strategic move, if someone acts on it and could have caught me unawares but now I know about this attack so the surprise factor is gone and I just have to keep a eye open for these kind of attacks. This technique is kind of heretical but after all it won't be that difficult to handle."

Fan Yifei, Lu Zhengping and Gao San Niangzi had once fought with Ding Busi and suffered against his golden whip. When they saw with their own eyes that this set of Jinlong whip technique was incessantly resisted by the sword technique of Mei Nuzi and were extremely happy and could not restrain themselves and cheered loudly.

Ding Busi got angry: "What good is it?"

Fan Yifei said with a smile: "this is the famous Jinlong whip technique of Ding Busi"

Gao San Niangzi said with a smile: "Jinlong whip technique is wonderful. I am really getting mad...this is so awesome!" She kept on calling these characters "I am getting mad, it's awesome". Ding Busi understood that she is trying to provoke him and cause trouble.

The person in dark green clothes made a set of Jinlong whip moves and moved the whip in a circular manner suddenly. Then the person in yellow made the move to attack him. The person in dark-green clothes could manage to avoid his attack and had to let go his whip and took the stance to fight empty-handed.

Shi Potian looked at this move and exclaimed: "Ahhh....this move really seizes the whip adeptly." Originally the person in dark-green clothes made a set of Ding family palm moves called "phoenix tail", "tiger fingernail", "beautiful woman picks up needle" and "demon to lock throat" and so on. Dingdang had taught him these on the long river boat.

Ding Busi got angry, said loudly: "Mei Nuzi, tell me, what are your intentions? ThisThisIsn't this bewildering?" In his heart, naturally he knew that this female surnamed Mei had deliberately planned to retaliate against him for his thoughtless sex with her sister at first and then later her abandonment.

He saw with his own eyes that person in yellow cloths was resisting the Ding

fist and foot martial art moves by his swordsmanship, he was really mean and could have picked up either his abdomen, or could have gouged his eyes or poked on his buttocks but person in green clothes was admirably resisting him. Suddenly, the person in yellow clothes made a horizontal sword swipe, the person in green clothes jumps back to fend. The person in yellow clothes threw his iron sword and used his hands to grasp the pharynx and larynx of person in dark green clothes.

Ding Busi called out in alarm: "Oh!" As if his own throat is in the hands of the other person. His heart was jumping madly and his Jinlong whip technique was ingeniously defeated by this woman.

Both disciples let loose one another and bowed in front of Ding Busi and Mei Nuzi and asked: "We ask elder Ding and Mei Nuzi for advice on our demonstration." They both greeted the two island hosts and then picked up the iron sword and drew back into the original ranks.

That woman surnamed Mei said: "You have managed to learn about 70-80% of this sword skill secretly without my help, this is admirable but it"

Ding Busi said in anger: "This kind of a martial art skill does not need any improvement, such lowly skills and ungraceful underhand tricks don't need refinement, this scandalous, what is so difficult to study?"

Bai Zizai said provokingly: "What scandal? You surnamed Ding, if you had suddenly met someone with this sword skill then you would have been thrown in confusion and by this time you might have 7-8 holes in your body."

Ding Busi said in anger: "You should try then."

Bai Zizai said: "In brief, you are not an eligible rival of Mei Nuzi now. She can nip this throat of yours in a matter of time. Even if your ability is ten times strong still you won't be able to evade."

That woman surnamed Mei said in harsh voice: "Who wanted you to flatter? Tell me how will I and Shi Xiaocui compare?"

Bai Zizai said: "You fall far too short in comparison to her. My wife is not here in person and hasn't come to island of heroes but here....that boy is my granddaughter's husband, you can compare your skills with him"

Shi Potian said: "I have already seen, we do not need to compare our skills."

That female surnamed Mei asked: "Are you Shi Xiaocui's disciple?"

Shi Potian said: "Yes."

That female said: "Then how are you his granddaughter's husband? Are you a bastard or what?"

Shi Potian said: "Yes, I am bastard (Gouzazhong)."

That female could not restrain herself and laughed at him loudly.

Mu Daozhu said in a loud voice: "Enough!" Although he said only this word but his voice was really impressive and totally drowned the voice of Mei Nuzi and she stopped laughing immediately.

Long Daozhu said: "Mei Nuzi, this set of swordsmanship gives the devil his due and is not inferior to the Ding martial art technique. However Mei Nuzi had been innovative and created this set of sword skills so obviously she is a natural talent and is clever. Some of the move in your technique are really ingenious and cleverly thought that is why we have invited you to island of heroes and hope that you can find some meaning in those ancient poetic verses and illustrations. As for the plum blossom fist, you have already inherited it so it doesn't matter much."

Mei Nuzi said: "So as you mentioned, Mei Fanggu never arrived at the island of heroes?"

Long Daozhu shook his head and said: "No."

Mei Nuzi sat dejected but actually muttered: "My elder sisterWhen my elder sister was at the point of death, she missed her daughter a lot"

Long Daozhu said to the disciple on his the right: "You give her that account book."

That disciple said: "Yes." He turns around and came up with several books, he turned several pages and then pointed his fingers at a line of character and started reading in clear and loud voice: "The first disciple of Plum blossom fist, Mei Fanggu, father is surnamed Ding, namely Ding(He read here Busi but talked ambiguously, so that people don't clearly knew that Ding Busi was in fact

her father and tried to save him from embarrassment)Since childhood she lived along with her mother but when she was 18 years oldAfter that she lives in seclusion in Yuxi Lushi east of Mt. Xionger."

Ding Busi and Mei Nuzi also stood up and said with one voice: "Is she is in Mt. Xionger? How did you know?"

That disciple said: "I did not know, it's written in this book."

Ding Busi said: "I did not know...then who will know...how is it written on this book then?"

Long Daozhu said: "The Island of heroes has no talents; we just want to defend the justice in martial arts world and take it as our duty to punish the wicked and reward the good. We just keep an eye on the proceedings of the martial arts world and various people and maintain a detailed record to refer in future."

That female surnamed Mei said: "So that's how it is. Mei Fanggu... sheShe is at Mt. Xiaonger."

She got really happy and turned to look at Ding Busi but only saw him looking really dejected and low-spirited, she heaved a deep sigh. That female surnamed Mei also gently sighed. Two people knew that although they had learned the whereabouts of Mei Fanggu but they won't be able to see her in this life.

Chapter 20 - Journey

Long Daozhu said: "I think numerous guests here still have suspicion about our intension in their heart, please speak frankly."

Bai Zizai said: "Long Daozhu said that we are invited to this island to look at the ancient poetic verses and pictorial illustrations, what thing is that? Please let us see that then?"

Long Daozhu and Mu Daozhu stood up.

Long Daozhu said: "Fellow learned gentlemen; we were just going to ask for advice regarding this matter."

Four disciples stepped to one side and held the edges of two big screens and pulled it open slowly, revealing a long corridor.

The two island hosts said in one voice: "Please!" and then went ahead leading the way.

Numerous guests thought: "Where this road goes....to the place where we will be murdered? The complexion of various people changes suddenly.

Bai Zizai said: "Son-in-law, come, we people from two different generation will lead the way."

Shi Potian said: "Yes!"

Bai Zizai took his hand and both of them entered that corridor first. Some people entered the corridor laughing, giving the impression that they are not scared but still they were actually unavoidably shivering. Every odd person expected that they are anyway doomed so they followed each other. Some ten people kept on sitting nearby table motionless but the numerous disciples and the servants of island of heroes actually didn't pay any attention.

Bai Zizai and others moved in a line for about hundred feet then they arrived at an entrance, three characters were engraved on it: "Xia Ke Xing".

A disciple in yellow clothes went forward to shove open the entrance and said: "This cave had actually 24 stone chambers; every one of you can move around and have a look. If you get tired then please come out and relax. The food is

already prepared and kept in the various stone chambers, No need to be polite, please use as per your will."

Ding Busi said with a sneer: "Every thing here is one's own will. No need to be polite...Ahhh...why don't you name this island "Do as you wish island"?"

Long Daozhu laughed and said: "Master Ding, what do you mean?"

Everybody arrived at the island of heroes voluntarily, if someone wants to depart, who dares to detain? Nearby the beach, the boats are ready. Whoever wants to depart can do so whenever he wants and as per his convenience."

The numerous guests never thought that the island of heroes will let them go so easily. Several people asked immediately with one voice: "We must go now, can we?"

Long Daozhu said: "Obviously, when have I and brother Mu had said anything otherwise? If we entertain a guest inconsiderately then will feel ashamed, how dare do we detain an honored guest?"

The group of people thought: "So if they are willing to let us go then what's the harm to look at that ancient poetic verses and illustrations and then we will depart. He had already said that he won't detain the guest and by his status, one cannot say that he won't keep his words."

Various people immediately entered the stone chamber; saw that on the east side there is a block of big smooth cliff, fire was lighted near the cliff and it was shining brightly. Several characters were engraved on the wall. In the stone chamber, there were more than ten people. Some were meditating, some were practicing martial arts, some shut their both eyes and were muttering, and about 3-4 people were arguing loudly.

Bai Zizai saw one person suddenly, was shocked for a moment and then asked him: "Elder brother Wen San, youYouYou are here?"

This person in the stone chamber was in black clothes was in fact the leader of the Eight immortals sword sect in Shandong, Wen Renhou. He was very close friend of Bai Zizai however he was not that excited to see him and only smiled casually and said: "So you too has come here today?"

Bai Zizai said: "Ten years ago I heard that you are invited to island of heroes to

eat eight meat gruel, every one assumed thatassumed that since you have no come back that you had already died, I even cried once I heard it....."

Wen Renhou said: "I am thoroughly studying an excellent martial art here and in good condition, why will I die? What a pity, what a pity you came late.

You look at this first sentence: "Zhao Keman Hu Ying" (literal meaning: The Zhao visitor adorns a non-han hat"), the character illustration says against this "Hu" character that these non-han people are from the western region.

Xin Tang Shu (The history of later Tang dynasty) said in one of its narratives that: 'Several hundred people practiced the phonetics of non-han people, they put on a long pin in their hair bun.....' It is said that the noble among them put on dance suits like those shown in this pictorial illustration" and at the same time he pointed on the cliff and the small character illustration so that Bai Zizai can read it.

Bai Zizai met his good friend for the first time in so many years, he was overjoyed in his heart, he was both eager to inquire about his well-being and also the situation in island of heroes.

He asked: "Elder brother Wen San, in the last ten years, how was your daily life?

Why didn't you convey a message to Shandong?"

Wen Renhou stared at the drawing ahead of him on cliff and said: "What did you say? This "Xia ke king" ancient poetry and illustrations contains the broadest and profoundest martial art mystery thorough out the ages, we are exhausted mentally but still cannot perceive through it meaning after so much meditation, how can we divert attention to the mundane affairs of the world? You look at this drawing, it isn't just a towering picture of a heroic warrior but it is actually what you call "The Zhao visitor". To understand the pictorial illustrations, one first need to understand the poetic verses too, this is of crucial importance first."

Bai Zizai turned his head to look at the illustration carved on the cliff wall. It was a drawing of a young scholar, he held a fan in his left hand and had taken an offensive palm position with his right hand; this stance was really graceful.

Wen Renhou said: "Brother Bai, what I figure from this drawing that this

erudite Confucian scholar is depicted as someone soft...kind of feminine and flexible (as in Yin), In the character note that in the character illustration, it is actually said that: "to be met from the mighty rigid in hand", what that means that it refers to the yang part. The meaning is that the body is Yin...soft and flexible but the usage is yang ...firm and full of power, this was not actually not that difficult to understand but the real knowledge is the balance of Yin and Yang and the mastery of it.....that is the enormous knowledge."

Bai Zizai nodded and said: "Good... brother Wen, this is my granddaughter's husband, won't you look at him and pass on some blessings? Boy... come and greet Grandpa Wen San."

Shi Potian approached him and knelt down to kowtow kindheartedly, he called out: "Grandpa Wen San."

Wen Renhou said: "Good, good!" But he still looked straight at the cliff and did not pay much attention towards him. He was looking at the drawing, he observed that person's attitude; suddenly he punched with his right palm and shouted excitedly: "left is Yin and right is Yang...this is how it should be."

Shi Potian said: "The palm strength of Grandpa Wen San is quite impressive."

Bai Zizai read aloud the characters carved on the wall and the explained annotation: "A verse from Zhuang-zi (Taoist author in 3rd century) says: The Prince says: I see a warrior with sword, his hairs are all disheveled and are hanging beneath that non-han hat on his temple, wearing some short fancy clothes."

A verse from Sima Zhuyun says: "That non-han person in hat speaks a very crude language and has no knowledge of art and science."

Brother Wen...these two characters "màn hú" must be read together then only they can be interpreted correctly. "màn hú" will mean rough and crude but "màn hú Ying" will actually mean a exquisite refined hat worn by a non-han person."

Wen Renhou shook his head and said: "No...No...you have to look at the next illustration: "Zuo Siwei says: "Unadorned hat"... Note: "Unadorned hat, a shining metal, a warrior," This means that 'This is one kind of a warrior who holds a metallic weapon, wears a hat and he may be coarse, he may be civilized.

Several years earlier, I once had consulted to the Mighty and resolute sect leader from Liangzhou, Elder brother Kang, he is from the western region and a non-han. There is nothing he doesn't know about those non-han people. He said that the non-han warriors actually wear this kind of a hat and its shape is similar to....." As he was saying these words, he squatted down and pointed his fingers towards a drawing on the floor.

Shi Potian listened to them discussing continuously, he was not able to understand; obviously he was not able to read the characters carved on cliff as he was illiterate and listened to them for half of the day. There was nothing of interest for him so he moved ahead and arrived in the second stone chamber. Passing through the entrance he saw several people brandishing the sword vertically and horizontally, actually seven pairs of people were using long swords and practicing among themselves. The sword edges were colliding but the sound created was not that loud. These people were using different kind of sword skills but all the movement was marvelous and obviously displaying extremely fine martial arts.

He saw the two people nearby fought for several moves, then the old man stopped and said: "A moment ago you used this sword move wonderfully but you must remember that the general theory behind this sword skill is "Wú gōu shuāng xuě míng" (literal: Wu hook frost snow light) these five characters. To achieve the hook you have to bend the sword and make a motion in form of hook. You must never forget the word 'hook' otherwise you will lose the original intention unavoidably. Moving a sword according to this sword skill is not difficult but attaining the curvature of hook using this straight sword is the art to master."

Shi Potian no longer listened to these two people arguing about the sword moves and arrived close to another two people, he saw that these two people were fighting extremely quickly, the sword moves were really swift and fierce, the attack actually does not looked like by the long sword and bit by bit it looked like a delimiting circle, the opposite party kept on parrying his attack with his sword but suddenly with a zheng sound, the swords broke in to two pieces and the two people simultaneously leapt backwards.

That tall and powerfully built man with dark complexion said: "This illustration

here says: A poem from Bai Juyi: "Do not turn around the straight sword, still the victory is his who knows how to bend". Obviously this sword skill of mine is encompassing the original intension in the annotated text on cliff."

Shi Potian recognized the voice of the other person; in fact he was the Taoist priest, the sect leader of the Shan Qing temple and fellow disciple of the Shi Qing couple. Shi Potian felt a bit scared and thought in his heart that if this person sees him then might get angry. He saw him taking the broken pieces of the sword and shaking his head, he said: "Wú gōu shuāng xuě míng" maybe the basic theory behind this set of skills but one have to make some concessions to achieve one's purpose, the word "gōu" is actually misleading and divert your thinking to an incorrect path."

Shi Potian listened to these guests arguing among themselves for half of the day, he moved in the west direction and raised his eyes to look at a man and a woman practicing with their sword.

This man and women both were actually executing the sword moves very slowly, after almost each move, that man will move aside and will analyze his move for half of the day, sometimes that female kept on making eight-nine moves on the trot. By the looks of them Shi Potian assumed that these two people are not husband and wife, most probably they might be brother and sister, or perhaps they might be mutual friend and had a very close relationship. They both focused their mind on joining the forces and learn martial arts but never had a word of dispute.

Shi Potian thought: "With these two people studying together, they might learn some exquisite swordsmanship." He slowly passed close to them.

He only saw the that man practicing with rapt attention, he slanted the sword to pierce, stopped at halfway and then took back, he shook his head, his facial expression was really depressed, he sighed and said: "It's always is not right."

That female comforts him and said: "Elder brother, that was five months ago, this move of yours have improved a lot in this period. Look at this annotation again: "King Helu of Wu had a treasured hook with him...Why ...What was so special about this treasured hook?"

That man took the long sword and read aloud on the explanation wall and said:

"'Wú Yuèchūnqīū' (Literal: history of southern states Wu and Yue) says: he was a good person but with a nefarious streak. He decreed in the country that one who will be loyal and good towards the Wu will be rewarded by the treasured hook insignia a hundred gold but if a person is found corrupt or rebellious towards the Wu then he will be killed by the treasured hook however blood money was offered of someone kills his two child, this then become the two hooks offered by Yu Helu.

Younger sister Fu, this story is really cruel and merciless, some people even killed their own son to get the gold from the King of Wu unexpectedly."

That female said: "I suspect that this "is cruel" two characters are the secret for this move of secret ...to "act right away and leave no room for maneuver"even though they were his own son but he was coerced to kill.....this part of annotation too is the key."

Shi Potian saw that this female was about 40 years old, the appearance was really delicate, when she spoke of killed children; unexpectedly her heart was full of sorrow and her facial expression changed. He looked at the cliff, he only saw dense and numerous engraving and several characters on the wall but he was able to see long swords in place of those characters, actually about 20-30 swords pointing in different directions.

These characters were either horizontal or straight, either casts aside or presses down firmly in eyes of the literate person and they still found it a character whatever the variations in the calligraphy but Shi Potian was not literate, he was actually able to see uneven sword movements, some swords cutting sharply, some downward, some are slanting to cut, some falling horizontally to cut. Shi Potian followed the movement of the sword, he was looking at the 12th sword when suddenly he felt a steep pain in his "jù gǔ" acupuncture point near his right shoulder as if a lot of internal energy had accumulated and is not able to pass. He controlled the flow of internal energy for a moment and the started looking at the 13th sword again. The internal energy surged towards the five nearby acupuncture points. He tried to again circulate his internal energy and looked at 14th sword but the flow of internal energy was getting more and more abundant and all of it moved towards his "qū chí"acupuncture point.

Shi Potian felt strange in his heart and thought: "After practicing the internal energy flow in my body, I normally feel full of energy and vigor but today I am not feeling the same. It seems that my belly is on fire, I am afraid it's the poison outbreak from that meat gruel."

He cannot restrain himself from getting scared and actually looked at those carvings in the wall. The internal energy stream in his body kept on moving itself through the meridians and reached his pubic area and then it slowly started to disperse along all the acupuncture points in his body. Suddenly he looked at the first sword again and he observed that the flow of swords actually resembled the flow internal energy across the meridian through different acupuncture points in the body. This internal energy flow was immense and at the same time unhurried and calm, he again reiterated the steps from first sword to the 24th sword, starting from the "ying xiāng" acupuncture point to "shāng yáng" acupuncture point and completing the entire cycle.

He thought in his heart: "These pictorial illustrations and the internal energy study are somehow related, it's only a pity that I do not know what's written on the wall otherwise I would have studied religiously and might have learned this set of martial art too. Grandpa Bai is still in the other room; I should ask him to tell me."

Therefore he returned to the other room, he only saw that Bai Zizai and Wan San both held a singlestick respectively, they both dueled for several moves and then debated about their understanding, one will point at the stone at the writing and state his views, then the opposite party will tell him that there is flaw in his understanding.

Shi Potian took the sleeves of Bai Zizai and asked: "Grandpa, what did these characters say?"

Bai Zizai said that he understands what they mean but Wen Renhou disagreed, he said kindheartedly: "Has made a mistake, made a mistake! Although Brother Bai, your martial art skills are high but I had a ten years advantage on you, do you think I have wasted these ten years? You can always not attain the knowledge in such a small period of time?"

Bai Zizai said: "Martial art study is like the Buddhist teachings, perhaps you can

sit under a tree for ten years but one can have sudden enlightenment in one evening. I think that this meaning is this"

Wen Renhou shook his head again and again, said: "You are grossly mistaken."

Shi Potian heard these two people argue continuously, he thought: "The writing illustration on the wall are so difficult to understand, Long Daozhu said a moment ago that they invited the innumerable masters, many had incomprehensible knowledge and they discussed for dozens years and still not able to unravel this mystery. I don't even know a single character, why should I take so much trouble?"

He leisurely strolled in and around the stone chamber in a round trip, he only heard the people in every direction discussing on all kind of diverse theories and views. He couldn't ask anyone to speak to him and got really bored and sat and watched the drawings on the cliff wall.

He watched the 24 sword shaped characters in the second room, he had understood by now that the position and direction of these swords is similar to the passages of internal energy through the vital acupuncture points in the body. He recalled the first drawing of that young scholar instantly. He looked at that for a moment again and thought that in this drawing, this person was wielding a very elegant stance with his right sleeve a bit withdrawn but he also noticed that the under the right rib a seam of cloth was carved such that it projected a flow of internal energy from "yuān yè acupuncture point" through the "shào yang" meridian towards the two acupuncture points "rìyuè" and "jīng mén" .

He felt delighted in his heart and examined carefully those character forms again, he saw that the person's facial features, the folds of his garment and fan's line were in the same line as a character stroke and this uniformity running throughout the drawing, he followed the imposing manner of that person to observe the same patterns.

He thought: "These drawing writing techniques and the circulation of internal energy through the acupuncture points is similar, at least I am aware of this trivial truth...obviously everyone knows about it. I am unable to comprehend this profound martial art secret similar to the situation when I didn't understood the secret of those wooden puppets but if I practice this shallow martial art then at

least I will be able to play here and pass time, I will wait for Grandpa Bai to comprehend this excellent martial art and then we can go back together."

The various meridians and the flow of internal energy through them were drawn in form of characters and this kind of calligraphy was unique in itself. The writing technique of the person who carved these characters and drawings was entirely different from what the people used in their real life. These were extremely unusual and any literate person who had learned to read and write will never look at these characters in terms of internal energy flowing through meridians and acupuncture points.

Normally any literate person will try to read the characters in from top to bottom and right to left but here the flow in the drawing and verses was actually depicting the energy flow through meridians and did not follow these rules. All the people from martial art were normally rigid and practiced in the same old way. Once they had learned to read and write the characters as child, it was almost incomprehensible for them to read it in some other way. On the contrary they tried to find the meaning of verses from different perspective but never deviated from the theory that these were in fact written in a different manner.

All in all there were altogether 81 sets of variations. After Shi Potian practiced about 30, he felt that his stomach is empty and he looked around for something to eat. He saw that several kind of flour dim sum and tea were kept at the corner of that stone chamber, he immediately went there to eat and drink. Afterwards he went outside to empty his bladder and came back and started studying again.

In the stone chamber, the lights were bright, whenever he got tired he would just rely on the wall to rest, whenever he felt hungry, he would just grab a dim sum and eat. He kept on studying and remembering all the 81 variations. Once he was confident that he has remembered all the variations from that first drawing, he went to the other room and looked for Bai Zizai but he was not in room.

Shi Potian was startled for a moment and called out: "Grandpa, grandpa!" he rushed to the other room and saw that Bai Zizai was grasping singlestick and fencing with a very old person with yellowish complexion. The sword skills of the two people was really clumsy but the sound emanating from the stick showed that both were using immense internal energy with each of their moves. He only

heard a big shout followed by a loud noise and the singlestick in the hand of Bai Zizai departed however the singlestick in the hand of that old man too broke in two pieces and both people simultaneously drew back two steps.

That old person showed a faint smile and said: "Power and virtue gentleman, you possess a heavenly supernatural power, this old man candidly admit defeat; however we should compare the sword skills, not the internal strength."

Bai Zizai said: "Taoist priest Yu, your swordsmanship is better than me, I admire but this is your Wudang sects martial art passed on to you by your elders, our intention is actually to master the sword skill on this cliff."

Yu Chadao smiled and nodded, he said: "According to you then what is the explanation?"

Bai Zizai said: "In 'Wú gōu shuāng xuě míng' this 'Ming' character makes sense greatly"

Shi Potian arrived at side of Bai Zizai and said: "Grandpa, should we go back now?"

Bai Zizai said: "What did you say?"

Shi Potian said: "Here Long Daozhu said we can go back when we want to...should we go back. Nearby the beach there are many ships, we may walk."

Bai Zizai gets angry: "Talking nonsense! Why are you so impatient?"

Shi Potian saw him to get angry and was afraid in his heart and said: "Grandma is waiting for you on the other side; she said that she will wait for you only up to eighth day of third month. If you don't go back by that day then she will throw herself to the sea and commit suicide."

Bai Zizai waited for a moment and then said: "you said eighth day of the third month? What is it ...we just arrived on eighth of this month, it's been just 2-3 days, we have a lot of time in our hands, why are you afraid now? We will surely go back again."

Shi Potian missed A'Xiu and recalled that day when she stood on the beach to see him off, she looked sad, he really cared about her and wished that he could fly and go back to her but saw that Bai Zizai had immersed himself

wholeheartedly in the study of this martial art secret and did not really care about giving it up and returning back but he did not dare to say immediately again, he leisurely strolled to arrive in the third stone chamber.

He stepped in to the stone chamber; he thought that the acoustics of the room was very distinct. Suddenly he realized that three people were in fact running around very rapidly and in highly unusual pattern exhibiting very high lightness skills. These three people running extremely fast and they were also talking but didn't stopped for a moment; their expression was really tranquil and this indicated their strong internal strength also because of the way they were talking and moving, their voice created a kind of echo in the room.

He only listened to the first old man saying: "This "Xia ke Xing" is written by that big poet Li Bai but Li Bai was a great poet but he was not a renowned martial artist. How can he write such a profound martial art skill in just 24 poems?"

The second person said: "This set of martial art is formulated by Gu Shuojin who shook the martial art once. He was master of great learning and integrity. He has borrowed the poems of Li Bai to express this mysterious martial art in writing. We cannot be as rigid as a cow's horn and adhere to the poems of Li Bai verbatim."

The third person said: "Although words of brother Ji are extremely rational but this "silver saddle and the white horse" doesn't make much sense in itself if we ignore the sentiments of Lu Bai."

The first old man said: "Yes. Not only so, I think that this and the annotation on the fourth room "as fast as a meteor" are in a continuous order and point towards a general solution. A prose cannot be written and interpreted out of context but a martial art can be deliberated out of this prose."

Shi Potian felt strange secretly that these three people were discussing the martial art but are running simultaneously. He thought: "Why don't they sit to discuss slowly, are they actually trying to overtake each other? However he understood their intension in a few moments.

He only listened to that second old man saying: "You are already sure that these two poems are somewhat connected then why are you using your

lightness martial art, needless to say which is so mediocre, to pursue me throughout?"

The first old man said with a smile: "I think actually you are pursuing me?"

He only saw the three people running more anxiously, their front piece and belt flowed as if created a kind of circle but three people were of almost similar skill level and no one was able to gain any ground on the other no matter how much they tried.

Shi Potian looked at them and then turned his head to look the illustrations on the wall. He saw the picture of a pair of steeds running; both of them held their head high in the air, a cloud of air under the foot giving the impression as they were flying. He was expecting this picture something similar to the illustrations in the first two rooms but to his disappointment it was entirely different.

He examined carefully under horse foot and again saw only fog as if it is continuously moving forward and all round, he followed the trail of the illustrations very in a circular form and to understand the drawing correctly he too had to run around in the room. He was actually running in a circle inside another circle but he has not studied the lightness martial art so his foot-steps staggered, his attitude was crooked and very shoddy. He was far inferior to those three old men who were running very rapidly. By the time Shi Potian managed one round, they completed about 7-8 rounds of the room.

The three old men came close to his ear and spoke to ridicule faintly and jeered: "This young fellow too wants to learn this martial art secret; unexpectedly he hasn't learnt the ordinary martial art yet. Ha, what sort of a display you are putting in front of us."

"So you are not that good in terms of lightness martial art, first learn it then come to learn the drawing on this cliff... Hahahahaaaaaa....!"

"Some people are expert in the Eight Immortals' drunken steps; this martial art of yours is also innate standard wise, this little brother's drunken steps can be called the ninth kind of immortal drunken step...that would be funny too."

Shi Potian blushes and his face turned red from one ear to another and almost stopped but as soon as he slowed he was not able to see the proper drawing as he looked up at the cliff. He didn't stopped and started to run again, after about

8-9 circles, he was concentrating completely on the wall and didn't even heard the ridicule of those three old man.

He himself didn't know how many times he circled around the room and stopped only after he remembered all the drawing completely. When he stopped, he found that the three old men have already disappeared without a trace, in fact he found four different people on his side. They were all grasping the weapons and imitating the attitude of a warrior on a horse and practicing with their sword.

These sword moves of all these four people was ruthless, they also read aloud the verses carved on the on the cliff. One person said: "This saddle is brightly illuminated by the bright light."

Another person said: "'zhào' is written lightly but 'bái' is written clear and deep."

Another person said: "Powerful and unconstrained style, this is shùnxī Wan Li."

The fourth person said: "this annotation of Li Shangyin says: "A person riding a cavalry horse to serve his country... these verse rhyme with those Taoist verses."

Shi Potian thought: "These mnemonics are really abstruse; I do not understand them at all. They practice their sword skills here for more than ten years, many for 30 years. How can I wait for such a long time? I don't have to take this so seriously, just take a look casually and then move forward, that's the end."

He arrived in the fourth room immediately; he looked at the cliff where the pictorial illustration was carved. It resembled some moving extremely fast like a meteor or shooting star. He sat down and kept on studying and meditating.

The "Xia ke Xing" poem altogether had 24 verses, namely each stone chamber for one verse and also 24 stone chamber with pictorial illustrations. He moved in to another room one by one, did not know much about the writing on the wall and only studied the internal strength martial arts from the drawings.

The 5th skill called "ten steps to kill one person", the 10th called "escapes the unexpected horizontal sword", the 17th skill "save Zhao from the hammer", each of these were set of sword skills.

The 6th "thousand miles does not keep in line", 7th "brush away the worldly

matter with a flick of sleeve", 8th "take refuge with the opponent", each of these were the set of lightness martial arts.

The 9th "drinking in a tomb", 14th "Crossing the five mountains", 16th "fragrance of a gallant and chivalrous mind", each of these were theories of set of fist and palm skills.

The 13th "three cups to spit", 18th "spirit element and secondary rainbow", 20th "awe inspiring city walls" each of these were related to study of art of breathing and internal strength.

Sometimes he studied extremely quickly, sometimes in one day he studied 2-3 sets of skills, sometimes even after consecutively studying for 17-18 days, he was not able to study the entire set. He was fully concentrated in his efforts to learn all the martial art and forgot about the time as days went past quickly. He didn't know how many days have actually passed through as he finished the 23 stone chambers one by one.

He usually completed the study of martial art in one room and then went to Bai Zizai to urge him to go back but Bai Zizai was getting more and more hooked to the study of this martial art day by day. The more he looked at the new illustrations and verses, the more he was more determined to find their meaning. When Shi Potian urged him to go back then he shouted abuse at him and said he was harassing him and disturbing his concentration by his bickering. Once he even swiped with his fist to hit him but Shi Potian evaded him and got away.

Shi Potian was cautious however he was startled in his heart and thought: "Long Daozhu said that numerous martial art masters from the martial art world are invited to island of heroes to study this martial art secret but no one has returned yet in last thirty years. It indicates that people became kind of enchanted with this amazing skills and no one bothers to leave this place. Fortunately my martial art skills are too weak and I am not literate so I can't fully understand the immenseness of this martial art and am not reluctant to part with it."

He listened to the words of Fan Yifei; he was actually explaining the meaning of the words written on the cliff. He actually only heard these words to get out of

his way, he did not dare to turn his head, he quickly forgot whatever he explained and was in his own thoughts.

He counted on his fingers to calculate, after coming to this island of heroes, he has passed about two and a half of a month already, he thought about leaving this island. He thought: "I have already looked at the 23 stone chambers; I should go at look at the 24th stone chamber too, if the illustrations are not too difficult then may be I will try to study them too. If grandpa is not certain or willing to walk out of this place then I have to go back myself, at least I will inform Grandma Shi about the situation here so at least they won't be apprehensive about the well being of people. It is good that Grandpa is studying martial art here and also he is not a risk to other people in the sect." he arrived in the 24th room immediately.

He entered the room and only saw Long Daozhu and Mu Daozhu sitting cross-legged on a brocade pad and both of them looking at the cliff with rapt attention.

Shi Potian was in awe to these two people, he does not dare to approach and stood far away from them and raised his eyes to look at the cliff. He was actually disappointed to look at the wall. Originally each of the 23 stone chamber walls had a pictorial illustration and some verses but this room had only characters engraved on the cliff and not drawing at all.

He thought: "This place doesn't have a single drawing, it does not have any attractiveness, I should go back to Grandpa and inform him that I will be leaving today only."

After thinking for several days about A'Xiu, Shi Qing, Min Rou et al., he was eager to meet A'Xiu again so he knelt down immediately and did his obeisance to the two island hosts and said: "The two island hosts had received me cordially and gave me the opportunity to experience the martial art skills on this cliff. I am really grateful, I will say my goodbye today.

Both of the island hosts were in deep concentration and were staring at cliff to understand the meaning, they didn't notice Shi Potian at all but kept on string at the cliff. When Shi Potian realized that they are in deep concentration so he thought that it would be discourteous to disturb them any further. He looked at

the cliff following the vision of those two people and suddenly felt that he these writings on the wall resembled to something circling in air to dance and cannot help but felt dizziness.

He calmed down for a moment and then looked at these characters again but again felt some kind of dizziness in his head. He changed his vision to some other place and thought: "What's so strange about these characters...how am I feeling dizzy?"

The curiosity got the better of him and he again gazed up to look at them. He only saw that the stroke of the handwriting was such that it looked like a tadpole, as if the wriggling tadpole wanted to come out of the wall. It looked that it was kind of congealed inside.

In his childhood when he was living alone on the barren hill, in spring he often seized many tadpoles in the mountain stream and raised them in small water hole. He looked at them as they lose their tails and their legs get improve and finally then turned in to a frog to escape by jumping out of that hole. He was alone in that barren hill and had no one to talk to him so they were his childhood companions. At this time when he saw the likeness of a tadpole in those characters, he felt like a reunion with childhood companions and was very joyful. He examined carefully the tadpoles on the cliffs. He only saw innumerable tadpoles either fleeing or leaps from one position to another and he found that really fascinating.

He looked at it for a long time and suddenly jumped out and thought: "Originally it seemed that these tadpoles are running off chaotically but actually it all related."

He looked one tadpole was jumping from the "xuán shu" acupuncture point to the "zhi yáng" acupuncture point. He looked at the third tadpole....suddenly he heard the sound of something besides him.

He heard someone breaking the calmness of the stone chamber and saying: "Shi Bangzhu is gazing at "to pass through too unreliably", you are actually familiar with that tadpole article by Fang."

Shi Potian had turned his head to see that Mu Daozhu and Long Daozhu were now looking at him and he got a bit nervous and said hurriedly: "I don't know a

character but looking at these small tadpoles is very amusing so I got a bit absorbed."

Mu Daozhu nodded and said: "This and that's the end. This "passed through too unreliably" was written in an ancient tadpole article, I originally found it really strange, but Shi Bangzhu is young and had some rare talent. You have knowledge of this kind of ancient and abstruse writing."

Shi Potian said embarrassedly: "Then I do not look, I do not dare to disturb two island hosts."

Mu Daozhu said: "You can look; you are not disturbing us at all." As he was saying these words, he closed both his eyes.

Shi Potian was about to get out of the way but then thought that if he leaves right away then both island hosts won't be pleased so he looked at the tadpoles again. In a few moments he again was drawn completely at those illustrations and got really excited. He looked again at that tadpole he was watching earlier, it jumped fiercely from "zhōng zhù" acupuncture point from the lower abdomen area...Shi Potian shivered at this sight and was totally shocked, he thought: "These small tadpoles are seriously strange, they have not yet turned into a frog but can still jump such great heights...it is really amazing."

He cannot restrain his childlike innocence and whole heartily devoted to further analyze the illustrations. The tadpoles leaping from one acupuncture point to another and with such vigor and intensity was amusing and well as fiercely captivating for him.

On the wall there was tens of thousands of these small tadpoles carved. Sometimes by coincidence when was able to move the two acupuncture point at the same position then he felt really happy and good throughout his body. He kept on looking at the character illustrations and soon forgot about the words of Mu Daozhu and their presence. He pursued the way of tadpole's movement on the cliff and tried to establish contact between each acupuncture point. But there were countless number of tadpoles on the wall and to string together the several hundred acupuncture points in entire body was a task easier said than done. This stone chamber was in total isolation and there was no way to ascertain whether it was day or night. As the time passed on, whenever he felt

hungry he would go and eat the noodles and then come back again and try out string the acupuncture pints. After having eaten about 8-9 meal, he was able to establish contact between several acupuncture point and gradually he was able to increase the number of acupuncture points.

As he was able to understand more and more, he realized that these small tadpoles were transferring along the meridians through which the internal energy circulates and gradually these tadpoles are turning in to small frogs and they were everywhere jumping in all the limbs and throughout the body. He found it interesting but was also afraid, he understood that if he will link more acupuncture points then the turbulence inside his body will be not easy to suppress. He knew that if he moved the "chu" acupuncture point to the "yi" acupuncture point then it can be pretty dangerous but by now he was totally captivated, as if possessed by a devil and could not stop staring at the cliff. When he was tired then he closed his eyes and relies on the wall to rest. Afterwards whenever he is awake, he again started looking at the millions of small tadpoles on the cliff and tried to understand the movement.

He looked like a crazy infatuated and hungry person, who hasn't eaten or slept for days but kept on looking at these small tadpoles, sometimes he saw the two island hosts looking at him in a really strange way but he was ashamed in his heart to meet their looks and no longer paid any attention.

He did not know when but one day when he was sleeping, he felt a fierce surge in pain and woke up. He felt that his internal energy was very abnormal. Sometimes it accumulated at a acupuncture point, sometimes it suddenly moved as if it will break all the barriers from pubic region to the top of the head, and then again from the top of the head to the pubic region . He was in a state of panic and did not know what to do. He suddenly got a idea, he did not know if it would work or not but he was running out of energy in his all the limbs and does not have the strength to execute but he still persisted with the palm skill moves he learnt in the 14th room, the "Crossing the five mountains". This set of palm moves allowed him to regulate some of his internal energy, as he kept on executing the moves, the internal energy generated kept on increasing. He started to execute the sword skill moves "ten steps to kill one person" from his right hand, although it was empty and he did not have the sword but he still

executed the moves in a steady manner.

These set of sword skill "ten steps to kill one person" made the things worse, he felt as his entire body is on fire and the skin of his whole body will expand and crack, he couldn't rest for a moment and immediately executed "Zhao Keman Hu Ying" that set of martial art skills to circulate the vital energy in his body. He felt really good as if he wanted to dance with joy; sometimes he was greatly delighted and sometimes as if greatly worried.

By the time he finished "Zhao Keman Hu Ying" he started to execute "Wu hooks frost and snow Ming". By now he was not thinking explicitly but all the skills which he learned automatically rushed out of his mind as if they were complementing the subsequent set of moves. After that he executed the "silver saddle and the white horse" and so on until the "a edict from your majesty", all forming a coherent set of martial art which includes the sword skills, the palm skills, internal strength skills and lightness martial art. When all of them combined together, they created a single martial art which was not a combination of skills but actually an embodiment of all the components and one cannot branch out any particular skill.

The set of skills "a edict from your majesty" this set of skill can be developed only after one learns to execute to the breathing skills "a world of no regret" but is actually caused from the 22nd move of "Zhao Keman Hu Ying". He can not help but to laugh aloud and then cry out aloud. He thanked Xie Yanke who had taught him about the martial art from those puppets, the snow mountain swords skills he learnt from watching the disciple of snow mountain sect. He remembered Dingdang teaching him the Ding family palm techniques, The Shi Qing couple teaching him the skills from the Shan Qing temple, Ding Busi teaching him all sort of palm techniques, Grandma Shi teaching him the Golden phoenix sword skill.

As he was thinking about these incidents, energy streams rushes to his heart. He brandished conveniently but did not suppressed the order and executed the skill "save Zhao from the hammer" and then "escapes the unexpected horizontal sword" immediately. He simply executed these skills as if they were naturally coming out themselves he don't have to remember them at all.

He as really happy in his heart and could not restrain himself to laugh and called out: "Wonderful!"

He heard the two people suddenly saying with one voice: "Really wonderful!"

Shi Potian was startled and stopped his move for a moment and saw both Long Daozhu and Mu Daozhu standing in the corner of the room, they had a joyful smile on their face and looked pleasantly surprised and were looking at him.

Shi Potian said hurriedly: "Little brother deliberately created trouble to you two. I was thinking andthis is bad..... I was practicing moves heedlessly and disturbed the two island hosts who were studying hard." He cannot help but was really terrified.

He only saw the two island hosts to be sweating profusely and dripping, their whole body clothing were completely wet and the corner of the room too was wet.

Long Daozhu said: "Shi Bangzhu had a god-given wisdom and have rare talent; I am honored to pay my respect to you." As he was saying these words, he got down to bow in front of him. Mu Daozhu too was prostrating himself.

Shi Potian stood up and only saw Long Daozhu bowing to him and immediately went to make them stand again but suddenly he saw the two people sitting on the ground only and it looked as if they don't have any energy to stand up. Mu Daozhu tried to lift himself with his two hands but couldn't manage to stand.

Shi Potian was perplexed and said: "How?"

He hurriedly moved to help them comfortably sit on the ground itself. Long Daozhu shook his head; a faint smile appeared on his face and he took out a trinket and put out in the hands of Mu Daozhu.

Shi Potian does not dare to disturb, he took a look at Long Daozhu; then took a look at Mu Daozhu and in his heart was surprised and couldn't decide what was going on. After a long time passed, suddenly Mu Daozhu shouted in a loud voice: "Whooooop!" And rose like a mad man and grasped Long Daozhu. Two people embraced each other in the same place and laughed heartily for a long time.

Shi Potian did not know what was going on and why are these two people so happy and he also accompanied them in laughing foolishly, he thought that if he didn't laugh then it will look like a misdemeanor.

Long Daozhu was holding a cliff and slowly stood up and said: "Shi Bangzhu,

we brothers have this big knot in our heart for dozens of years, you today have finally managed to solve this, we are deeply grateful."

Shi Potian said: "I... howHow did I solve this?"

Long Daozhu smiled and said: "Shi Bangzhu, You are so modest. You have understood this "Xia ke Xing" martial art secret; you are in fact the first person in the martial art world to figure out this secret. Besides the elder who had actually created this martial art and written it on this stone chambers, we think through the ages, only a few people in the, martial art world could have actually solved it."

Shi Potian was really terrified, he said continually: "Little brother does not dare, Little brother does not dare."

Long Daozhu said: "In this cave less than 10% people even know about the classic literature about the tadpole, not only Shi Bangzhu was aware of that but also managed to figure out its meaning...this is really admirable. Would you be willing to advise us about this?"

Shi Potian looked at Long Daozhu, then look at Mu Daozhu, he saw that the complexion of both these people was sincere; actually they were getting really emotional and swayed by thought of personal gains and losses, as if fearing if he would be willing to reveal the profound mystery.

He hurriedly said: "I will let you know what I understood. Actually I saw one tadpole jumping from the "xuán shu" acupuncture point to the "zhī yáng" acupuncture point. I then looked at this tadpole jumping fiercely from "zhōng zhù" acupuncture point...." he pointed at the next tadpole and explained the two people. He looked at Long Daozhu and Mu Daozhu and by their face they looked confused and he thought that they didn't understand so he asked: "Did I speak incorrectly?"

Long Daozhu said: "OriginallyOriginallyWhat Shi Bangzhu looked at ... at these tadpoles, you did not look at characters, how then Shi Bangzhu was able to understand thoroughly entire "to pass through too unreliably"?"

The face of Shi Potian turned red; he said: "Little brother had not studied since childhood; I don't even know a character. Actually I am extremely ashamed to admit this."

The two island hosts jumped at this admission and asked simultaneously: "Aren't you literate?"

Shi Potian shook his head saying: "I am not literate. IAfter I go back, I have decided to ask A'Xiu to teach me how to read. Actually everybody here is literate, I did not tell anyone or they would have laughed at me and embarrass me."

The two island hosts looked at his face and simply knew that he was very simple, straightforward and honorable person. They couldn't detect any malice or any hidden meaning in his words but in reality, they cannot help but does not believe. Long Daozhu only thought it about in his head but he got more confused.

He relied on a cliff and asked: "You are not literate, you went from one room to second and so on...how did you manage to understand and solve the annotations, who was actually helping you to read out those verses?"

Shi Potian said: "Nobody was reading those for me. Grandpa Bai solved several, brother Fan Yifei from Guangdong solved several, I did not understand and actually did not listen. II was just looking at the drawings on the cliffs and suddenly indulged in flight of fancy and was able to see that the seams of the cloths, the fan and the acupuncture points were continually in the same line."

Mu Daozhu said: "You are not literate, how can you actually solve the verses and drawing on the cliff, thisHow can this be possible?"

Long Daozhu said: "I seem that he had some kind of a divine intervention or Shi Bangzhu had some god-given wisdom and rare talent."

Mu Daozhu stamped his foot suddenly and called out: "I understand....I understand now...brother...I think its time now to..."

Long Daozhu got sad and understood immediately and said: "yes...". They have lived in that island for dozens of years; their skills were pretty similar and were extremely old, only difference was that Mu Daozhu was less eloquent and far less comfortable in handling people so he mostly kept quiet. Two people used all their four palms and grasped the cliff's face; the look on their face was really tragic, bitter and astringent.

Long Daozhu turned his head towards Shi Potian and said: "Shi Bangzhu, you are not literate, actually you are fortunate. I think I too understand the reason now...I suspect we understand what made our life miserable in past dozens of years but we don't harbor any regret, finally its over."

Shi Potian scratched his head with his finger and asked: "What did you understand ...what made you miserable?"

Long Daozhu sighed gently and said: "Originally these many annotation writings, each was intentionally leading the people to fall into error but this martial art secret had such a charm over every one of us that no one was willing ignore those annotations and only work on the illustration throughout.

Shi Potian said: "So island hosts are you saying that that these all characters annotations are useless?"

Long Daozhu said: "Not only useless, moreover greatly harmful. If we have not followed these annotations then we two people might have avoided the innumerable pain and hardships we have faced in last forty years. It had all gone waste now...so many years of practice and struggle and we have nothing to show."

Mu Daozhu sighed and said: "Originally this "passes through too unreliably" is not related to that classic to tadpole at all butbut it is actually a illustration of internal energy passages through acupuncture points and different other techniques...ohhh....we have wasted 40 years of our life40 years!"

Long Daozhu said: "passes through too unreliably:it really is unreliable. Brother, your hair has also turned snow white!"

Mu Daozhu looked at Long Daozhu as if to say something but did not speak and they all understood that he wanted to say that the same had happened to Long Daozhu too.

The two island hosts sighed deeply and now both appeared exceptionally old compared to two months back when Shi Potian saw them on the eighth of last month, then they looked old but extremely fit, healthy and dignified.

Shi Potian was still puzzled, he asked: "then why did he inscribe that many characters on the cliff intentionally, did he really want the people to take the

wrong path, what purpose does it solves?"

Long Daozhu shook his head and said: "This is very difficult to say. Perhaps this elder was not willing to share this knowledge too easily, or these annotations were afterward separately added by some other people. This was in the past...no one knows what exactly was his intention."

Mu Daozhu said: "Perhaps this elder does not like the scholar; he wanted someone from the martial art who is not literate perhaps like Shi Bangzhu, an upright honest person to benefit intentionally."

Long Daozhu said: "This senior had a rare talent to create martial art techniques like this and had a complex personality...who can guess his intentions?"

Shi Potian saw their facial expression and they look really tired and sad, he felt sorry for them in his heart and said: "Two island hosts, if what I have learned here is truly useful then I can share this knowledge with you two. Lets move to the first stone chamber and I will explain one by one, III do not dare to conceal anything thing."

Long Daozhu smiled at him bitterly and shook his head; he said: "Little brother has good intention but we two people decline with thanks. Little brother is really kindhearted and will be benefited by this knowledge and so will the other people from the martial arts world. We two people wasted our life to learn this martial art but now have realized that it's all useless."

Mu Daozhu said: "Little brother has already solved this puzzle; this was the last wish of us two people. If little brother practices these skills then we will feel that we have also done the same."

Shi Potian asked earnestly: "Then at least I can explain in detail about the internal energy movement as depicted by tadpoles in this cliff."

Long Daozhu smiled mournfully and said: "Little brother you will need some really marvelous ability to teach other people but it won't be possible to use this cliff as source now....little brother, you take a look again."

Shi Potian turned around to the cliff to look, he cannot help but was amazed as he saw the stone chips from the cliff dropping piece by piece slowly, the

character illustration or that tadpole drawing was almost 70-80% destroyed now.

He said in great surprise: "What's wrongwhen did this happen?"

Long Daozhu said: "Little brother just now"

Mu Daozhu said: "Brother... think about this matter again...First of all we should gather everyone together and announce this matter."

Long Daozhu immediately said: "Good, good. Shi Bangzhu, please."

Shi Potian did not dare to advance; he followed after the Long Daozhu and Mu Daozhu and came out of the stone chamber. Long Daozhu called his disciple to invites numerous guests in the big meeting hall.

Originally after Shi Potian understood the martial art of the cliff he was not able to practice the move properly. When the two island hosts saw that then they were greatly astonished. Long Daozhu went forward to take control and invite him.

However Shi Potian was still bewitched by newly acquired knowledge from this cliff and thought that some people were attacking him. He naturally held against them for several moves. Long Daozhu found it really hard to resist and Mu Daozhu had to come forward and help him out. In the present martial art world, no third person could have alone managed to stay in front of them but even after they collaborated, they could not match the wonderful martial art Shi Potian had learned from the cliff.

If these two people had stopped the moves then obviously Shi Potian would have also stopped but these two people kept on trying and used more and more internal energy and their four palms fluttered with immense strength. The more strength they applied, Shi Potian countered attack was even more stronger. The palm wind created by the three sets of palm was hitting the cliff and shook the entire stone chamber unexpectedly. Only the palm strength of the two island hosts was enough to destroy the cliff and once it was strengthen by the internal energy of Shi Potian accompanied by his new skills, the palm wind created by these three didn't destroyed the cliff as they where not attacking it directly but the top surface couldn't bear the brunt and started to chip away slowly along with the character annotation.

Mu Daozhu knew that Shi Potian was totally focused on his practice and didn't realize that this encounter with both of them as he was in kind of trance so he prevented Long Daozhu to say again and to avoid Shi Potian to realize that he himself was responsible to damage this cliff accidentally but he himself was very sad in his heart and thought that they were also responsible in damaging of this cliff...if only they had not engaged with Shi Potian then may be...

Three people arrived in the hall and sat down as numerous guests and various disciples arrived one after another. Long Daozhu transmitted orders to extinguish each stone chamber lights. He knew that some people might want to avoid this meeting and try to study and won't be willing to come out altogether.

The numerous guests took their seat. In the past 30 years after arriving in the island of heroes, this was the first time that people gathered apart from the case when some one died because of old age. For 30 years, these people come and go in these 24 stone chambers from morning until evening and never actually assembled in this manner.

Long Daozhu asked the disciple to count and confirm that all the guests are indeed in the hall and no one is hiding and then told something to his senior disciple in a very low tone. The disciple looked stunned and greatly astonished. Mu Daozhu also told his senior disciple in a very low voice.

The two senior disciples heard the instruction from their masters and left the hall for a long period of time with ten of their fellow disciples.

Long Daozhu arrived at the side of Shi Potian and said in a low voice: "Little brother; Please doesn't mention this matter of stone chamber to other people just now. Even if you are most intimate with any person then still you cannot let him know that you have solved the profound mystery otherwise you will face infinite disaster and worry in rest of your life."

Shi Potian said: "Yes, I will follow the instructions of island hosts."

Long Daozhu also said: "As the saying goes: "Always hide the loot". If you tell about this martial art then it might eventually leak in the martial art world. If some people learn then they will either hate you or will become jealous to you. So they will challenge you to compare your skills or will unavoidably ask you to teach this skill; Even if you refuse to reveal the secret then they will try to harm

you by any means possible. Although your martial art skills is high but you are a upright honest person and actually in reality it is virtually impossible to guard against. Therefore this matter should not be divulged."

Shi Potian said: "Yes, many thanks to island host to give this suggestion and share your experience. Little brother is deeply grateful."

Long Daozhu shook his and said in a low voice: "It was a pity that I and brother Mu cannot see the exhibition of this rare talent."

Mu Daozhu understood his meaning and turned his head to look at Shi Potian and also regretted that they had that encounter with his just him.

Shi Potian thought: "These two island hosts have taken care of me and treated me so well....after I go back to see A'Xiu, I will come again back to this island with her and visit these two old people."

Long Daozhu came back to his place after instructing Shi Potian and said to the numerous guests: "Numerous friends, we had gathered in this island for such a long time and I feel an affinity towards all of you. However I think that we were destined to be together until now onlyI will like to bid farewell to all of you....goodbye."

As soon as the numerous guests heard these words, they were shocked greatly and inquired hurriedly: "Why?" "What is the matter?" "Do the two island hosts are leaving the island for journey?"

The people asked different kind of question all at one time and things became chaotic. Suddenly they heard the loud bang sound and a big thunderous detonation intermittently.

The numerous guests immediately stopped talking.

Long Daozhu said: "Everybody, we gathered here on this island and hoped that we will be able to solve this martial art secret of "Xia ke Xing"what a pity. I have to inform you all that this island of heroes is going to be drowned in a very short time."

Numerous guests asked in great surprise: "Why?" "Is it an earthquake?" "Is it volcanic eruption?" "How did island host know?"

Long Daozhu said: "Our brother Mu had discovered just now that the center of this island will have a volcanic eruption, this outbreak will change this entire island into a sea of fire immediately. This moment thunderclap is faint but it's arriving for sure so please depart rapidly."

Numerous guests were half believing and half doubting and cannot make up mind. Most people clinged to the martial art cliffs and were inclined to rather face this volcano and get killed but were not willing to depart like this.

Log Daozhu said: "Each one of you, if you do not believe that you might as well go to the stone chambers and see it your self, various rooms have all collapsed and the cliffs are destroyed. This earthquake is a precursor to the volcano and might spurt at any moment now."

The numerous guests heard that the cliff was destroyed and were again really surprised; everyone rushed immediately towards the stone chambers.

Shi Potian also went together along with other people; he only saw that each stone chamber was destroyed and the cliff with drawing, illustrations and annotations had all collapsed and the entire stone chambers were damaged heavily.

Shi Potian knew that the two island hosts have instructed their disciples to destroy these intentionally and felt really sad for them in his hear and thought: "it is not good...if I had simply returned then this would not have happened."

Some people looked at the situation and felt that something is not right and guessed that this destruction of the stone chambers was obviously an artificial act and not some natural calamity because of the earthquake. They immediately rushed back to the main hall to ask the two island hosts about this. They raised their voices and shouted loudly, as the incoming group rushed in the hall; they saw that the two island hosts sitting on their seats in a very calm and motionless state. Suddenly they heard a big wailing sound of someone and they saw the disciples of both island hosts prostrating in front of them and weeping loudly.

Shi Potian was frightened and felt as if heart jumped up to his mouth, he rushed in between the crowd and called out: "Long Daozhu, Mu DaozhuyouYou ..."

He only saw those two people sitting motionlessly...they had already passed

away.

Shi Potian turned his head to Zhang San and Li Si to ask: "Two islands host were originally in good condition, what's wrongHow they did die?"

Zhang San sobbed and said: "When two masters passed away, they said that they are now ready to leave this world.....they have no regret now."

Shi Potian looked overhead and was really sad, he cried out aloud. He did not know that how the two islands host died suddenly. One moment they were good and the next they were just dead.

Actually they were really in good health considering their age and were fully devoted to unravel the secret martial art of these cliffs and might have live several years more but unexpectedly when Shi Potian started practicing this new martial art, both of them got involved with him in competing their internal energy. Both of tried to hold him for quite some time but couldn't and in the process got seriously injured. When Shi Potian completed his practice and came out of the trance, he saw both of them in the corner of the room, drenched in their own sweat and looking really weak. He didn't remember his fight with them but the two island hosts were seriously injured. They knew that he is unaware of this incident so they didn't told him otherwise they knew that he will always hold himself responsible for their death and deeply blame himself for the rest of life.

That person Huang Shan, the senior disciple wiped the tear from his eyes and said in a loud voice: "Numerous honored guests, our benevolent teacher is dead, his last words were to make sure that all of you reach the mainland safely. Please do not discard these bronze medals of Command of reward and happiness; it might be still helpful in future. If anyone of you is facing any problem and embarrassed about getting us directly then please hold this bronze medal as a sign in the small fishing village of Qia on the shore of South China Sea. I and my brothers will do whatever we can to help you."

The numerous guests who were all disappointed were suddenly very happy as they heard these words. They thought: "These disciples of island of heroes are extremely skillful, if I have to get rid of any person or even if there is some huge disaster then I am sure that we can handle them it with their help."

The person in dark green cloths cam forwards and said: "The ships are

prepared and are ready to move, I invite all the guests to proceed."

Every one of the guests kneeled down and bowed in respect with both hands clasped to honor both island hosts and said their farewell speech.

Zhang San and Li Si came to Shi Potian; Zhang San said: "Brother, we are leaving now but we will meet again in the future."

Shi Potian along with Bai Zizai, Fan Yifei, Gao San Niangzi, The Taoist from ShanQing temple and others arrived at the seashore. This time the boats were much bigger in size and only 3-4 ships were there to carry the guests back to the main land. The sail were hoisted and the anchors pulled up.

Chapter 21 - Who Am I?

Several people have lived on the island of heroes for tens of years, they were bewitched to unravel the mystery of these martial art. They couldn't believe that the island is going to be destroyed and the cliffs are already gone and deeply regretted it all. Some people on the other hand repented and deep regretted that why didn't they left it all and returned to their family. Several people sat on the boat but everyone had huge regrets and some of them even started beating their chest in despair but most of them were thinking that at least they all are returning alive to their home which was not exactly what they were thinking when they were coming to this island.

Shi Potian looked at the island of heroes as it merged with the horizon. Suddenly he remembered the incident and cannot help but started sweating, he stamped his foot to call out: "it's bad, it's really bad! Grandpa, nowToday is several dayafter we left...what is the date today.....what is the date?"

Bai Zizai was startled, he yelled: "Oh!" He shivered for a moment and said: "II do not knowDo not know nowactually a lot of days have passed.....lot of days?"

Ding Busi too was sitting on the same boat, he asked: "A lot of days have passed, so...so what?"

Shi Potian asked: "Grandpa Ding Busi, do you remember how many days we have spent on this island of heroes?"

Ding Busi said: "100 days is also good, 200 days is also good; who remembers...who cares?"

Shi Potian was hugely anxious, he almost came to tears and a streak of tear came out of his eyes, he came to Gao San Niangzi and said: "We came here on the 8th day of last month, is it the third month now?"

Gao San Niangzi counted on her fingers and said: "We have gotten out of the island on the 115th day, Today it's the fifth day of fourth month...no...it is the 6th day of fourth month."

Shi Potian and Bai Zizai called out in alarm with one voice: "the fourth month?"

Gao San Niangzi said: "Naturally it is the fourth month!"

Bai Zizai beats his chest to yell: "it's terrible...terrible!"

Ding Busi laughed and said: "terribly sweet!"

Shi Potian got angry: "Grandpa Ding, grandma Shi said that if we don't return back by 8th day of third month then she will throw her in the sea and die...youWhat funny do you see here? A'Xiu also said that he will also throw herself in the sea"

Ding Busi said: "She said that she will throw herself on the 8th day of third month? NowToday it is fourth month"

Shi Potian cried and said: "Yes, so ...so what?"

Ding Busi said in anger: "Xiaocui threw herself on the 8th day of third month, by now she is already dead for twenty days, why are you are you crying now? Her temperament was much hard, if she said that she will jump in the sea on 8th day then it won't be 7th day or 9th day...it will be 8th day! Bai Zizai... damn you...old bastard...you animal, youWhy didn't you go back early? You raised this old thief too...even he didn't go back!"

Bai Zizai beats his chest and called out: "Good, I am an old bastard, I am the old thief."

Ding Busi again scolded: "You Gouzazhong...you Gouzazhong ...why don't you go back earlier?"

Shi Potian cried and said: "Good...I seriously a Gouzazhong."

They suddenly heard a harsh voice of a female: "Shi Xiaocui dies...that is good... why are you scolding other people...it's good that this matter is closed now? Why do you curse at people?" She was of course that lady surnamed Mei.

Ding Busi was ashamed and did not dare to scold again but still talked incessantly.

Bai Zizai actually blamed Shi Potian: "You already know that your grandma was throwing herself in the sea on the 8th of third month then why didn't you tell me earlier? You are a bastard tooII will wrench apart your neck."

Shi Potian was already sad and was not willing to argue and didn't say

anything.

In the meantime the southern wind started to blow and the sailors hoisted the sails and the navigation was really fast now. Bai Zizai was wild and crazy, he not only scolded Shi Potian but also started scolding Ding Busi and both of them actually started fighting on the boat itself and even managed to hit several other people, everyone intervened and stopped them from fighting.

By the evening of third day, they were able to see the first sight of land. As they reached closer to the shore of the South China Sea, several people cheered. Bai Zizai actually kept his both eyes on the shore or looking at the ocean waves, as if trying to seek for the corpse of Grandma Shi and A'Xiu.

As the ship moved closer to the shore, Shi Potian looked as far as the eye can see, he was able to vaguely see the sea shore, it was exactly similar to when he left from the same place, there were a row of palm tree on the beach, a cliff on the right hand side and three coconut trees nearby throwing three long shadows. He remembered that four months ago, Grandma Shi and A'Xiu were standing there to see him off and hoping that he will return well but now Grandma Shi and A'Xiu are actually already buried in some fish's abdomen, they can't even save their skeleton and could not restrain himself from crying.

As the boat came close to shore, suddenly someone shouted to draw their attention towards the cliff. The people looked together at the cliff; they only saw the silhouette of two people, one person in grey and other in white leaping from the cliff in to the sea.

Shi Potian remotely Grandma Shi and A'Xiu leaping from the cliff in to the sea, he was pleasantly surprised, in reality it was no small matter, he already assumed that they are dead but suddenly he saw them alive but also at the same time leaping towards the sea to die. He immediately gathered his entire body strength on his foot, made a crouching stance and jumped to leap high in the air. His body came out of the ship like an arrow streaming out of a bow.

The profound internal strength he learnt at the island of heroes supported him enormously to make this incredible jump. He saw with his own eyes that the moment he jumped the deck beneath his left foot deck gave up fell in the sea and the one under his right flew back several feet.

He approached towards A'Xiu from her left side; he stretches his left arm to grasp her body. He lost his momentum with the added weight of two people and started to fall in the sea but the impact of the fall was minimal. As the two legs Shi Potian sunk in to the sea, she saw that Grandma Shi dropped in the left, he immediately moved his hand to search for her and as soon as he got a grasp at her, he immediately transferred his strength and executed the move "silver saddle and white horse" to throw the body of Grandma Shi body towards the boat in a very steady pace.

On the ship the people shouted loudly with one voice. Bai Zizai and Ding Busi were already ready at the bow of ship to grasp her as they saw Grandma Shi flying towards the boat. The two people simultaneously put out a hand to grasp her.

Bai Zizai shouted loudly: "Make way!"

Ding Busi was pushing people to get ahead and catch Grandma Shi as she comes, unexpectedly that female surnamed Mei extended her palm to push, this technique was really strange and Ding Busi immediately fell in to the sea.

Bai Zizai immediately secured a position as per her flight and immediately caught Grandma Shi pretty easily but he didn't expect that the internal energy of Shi Potian will be so strong. He drew back one step and his both feet skidded back and broke the deck but he still firmly grasped Grandma Shi as they sat in the big hole, he hugged Grandma Shi and put her out of that hole.

Shi Potian held A'Xiu and took support of the fallen deck to propel himself back to the boat along with A'Xiu.

Ding Busi was well versed with swimming luckily; he controlled his fall in the water and at the same time shouted abuse. The sailors on the ship threw the rope and pulled him up. Everybody was jabbering at once and people were in great confusion.

Ding Busi came back to the deck, water dripping out from his whole body and looked at that woman in veil and called out suddenly: "YouYou are not her younger sister, you are she...you are ...!"

That woman wearing the veil sneered and said: "Your courage is really big, you dare to hold Shi Xiaocui in front of me!"

Ding Busi said: "YouYou are! You pushed me to that seaThis move of "flying in to high peak", there is only one person in the world who can do that."

That female said: "You know well." She put out a hand to uncover the veil over her face and revealed her wrinkled face, her skin color was extremely white as if it was covered by the veil for a really long time and had not seen the sunlight.

Ding Busi said: "Wenxin...Wenxin...is it really you! Why did you deceive me saying that you have died?"

That woman with veiled face was in fact Mei Wenxin, she and Ding Busi were lovers in the past. They had a daughter Mei Fanggu but Ding Busi was deeply in love with Shi Xiaocui and he abandoned Mei Wenxin but after dozens of years unexpectedly they had this reunion.

Mei Wenxin moved her left hand and seized the ears of Ding Busi firmly and said in a grating voice: "You only hope that I have already died, that would have been good...isn't it?"

Ding Busi felt ashamed after listening her and did not dare to struggle, he forced a smile and said: "leave it...there are numerous heroes here, it doesn't look good."

Mei Wenxin said: "I want you to look bad in front on everyone. My Fanggu... can I come to search her?"

Ding Busi said: "Leave it quickly! Long Daozhu have said that she is on mount Xionger. We will look for her, let us find her."

Mei Wenxin said: "if I found my child then I will forgive you but if I didn't then I will rip out both ears down!"

In all these noise and confusion, the boat already approached the shore. The Shi Qing couple, Bai Wanjian and snow mountain disciples Cheng Zixue and others came forward to welcome them as they saw with their own eyes that Bai Zizai and Shi Potian have returned well and have also saved Grandma Shi and A'Xiu from drowning.

Shi Qing couple and Bai Wanjian were genuinely happy, on the other hand the snow mountain sect disciple Cheng Zixue, Qi Zimian and Liang Zijin were all disappointed but still came forward with smiling face and hurried forward to

congratulate.

On the ship the numerous heroes were impatient to get back to their families now, as soon as they came to shore. All of them leapt to the land and everyone quickly went on in their respective directions. Fan Yifei, Lu Zhengping and Gao San Niangzi said there farewell to Shi Potian and returned to Guangdong immediately.

Bai Wanjian said to his father: "Father...as mother said earlier that she will throw herself in the sea if you don't return by 8th of the third month. When she saw that you haven't returned by the end of day then she decided to throw herself in the sea to commit suicide. She knew that I might try to stop her so she locked my acupuncture point unexpectedly suddenly. Thank God, if you were late then even if you have come back...you might not have saved her."

Bai Zizai said: "What? You said that today is 8th of third month?"

Bai Wanjian said: "Yes, today is 8th."

Bai Zizai also asked: "Its 8th of third month?"

Bai Wanjian nodded and said: "yes...its 8th of third month."

Bai Zizai cannot restrain himself to put out a hand to scratch his head and said: "We reached the island of heroes on 8th of last month. We stayed for more than 100 days in the island, how can it be 8th of third month today?"

Bai Wanjian said: "You might have forgotten, this year we have an intercalary second month...we actually had two second months this year."

Bai Zizai suddenly remembered and was more than happy. He said to Shi Potian: "Young boy, why didn't you me earlier? Ha, ha! This year has an intercalary in second month. This was good!"

Shi Potian asked: "What is this intercalary second month? Why do we have two second month this year?"

Bai Zizai said with a smile: "To have two second month is actually good....if there would have been three second months then also it would have been good.... so long as my wife is alive even if there are 100 second month still it won't be any problem!" The people loudly laugh.

Bai Zizai turned his head to ask: "Well, didn't that old thief Ding Busi was with us...where he sneaked. He has disappeared without a trace?"

Grandma Shi said with a smile: "What do you want to do with him? Mei Wenxin had turned his ear and they have left to look for their daughter Mei Fanggu!"

The complexion of Shi Qing couple changed as soon as they heard the words "Mei Fanggu". They asked with one voice: "You said Mei Fanggu? What place are they looking?"

Grandma Shi said: "I listened to that female surnamed Mei to say in the ship a moment ago that they must arrive at Mt. Xionger and look for their daughter Mei Fanggu."

Min Rou said: "Thank God, finallyFinally after inquiring this female's whereabouts, senior fellow-pupil! WeWe must catch up."

Shi Qing nodded and said: "Yes." Both people said there farewells and moved to leave immediately.

Bai Zizai shouted: "Everybody is lively, we have met after so much time...what's the hurry....we should be together for at least a fortnight; then only you must leave."

Shi Qing said: "Elder Bai, you did not know about this Mei Fanggu. She is out big personal enemy. She killed our new born child. We have been looking for her for last 18 years in the martial art world but didn't find any information about her. Today unexpectedly we know about her so we can't delay, I am afraid that she will hide again if she gets another opportunity."

Bai Zizai said: "That female killed your son? Absurd...then let me come with you too, I will tear her to shreds. Your matter is my matter, Let us move all together. That old thief Ding Busi and that female thief, Mei Wenxin are their too. That old lady's family martial art "plum blossom fist" is quite fierce; you must need some helpers to avenge your enmity."

Once Bai Zizai saw that Grandma Shi and A'Xiu are safe then his mood was really happy, at this time, he would have consented to any matter.

Shi Qing and Min Rou thought that Mei Fanggu has Ding Busi and Mei Wenxin

so it would be difficult for them to hold against them but if Bai Zizai and rest of them come with them than it would be quite easier. He could not have wished for anything else. Their fellow disciple from Shan Qing temple was coming on the next ship but Shi Qing and Min Rou were more interested in taking revenge so they left immediately on the journey to mount Xionger with Shi Potian and other people.

They reached Mt. Xionger after some days. That Mt. Xionger and surrounding area was spread in several hundred miles and they did not know where exactly was Caoling area that Long Daozhu mentioned at island of heroes is. They looked for several days but found no trace at all.

The search tested the patience of Bai Zizai too. He asked Shi Qing: "Brother Shi, you are a famous and chivalrous person in the central plains. You are also such skilled in martial art, how did she manage to kill your son. What enmity that female thief had with you that she actually killed your son?"

Shi Qing sighed, said: "This matter is of previous generation retribution, I don't know how to mention."

Min Rou said: "Senior fellow-disciple, youyou can't hide the facts and misdirect them intentionally? If you do not want to kill her to revenge then.....II" As she spoke, teardrops started flowing from her eyes.

Bai Zizai said: "Why will he not want to kill her? Oh...this is not good! Brother Shi, this female thief might be very beautiful, did you have some kind of an illicit relationship with her?"

The face of Shi Qing turned red and he said: "What are you talking about Elder Bai."

Bai Zizai stared at him and said: "it's certainly so! This female thief would have become jealous and might have struck a vicious blow to kill your newborn son!"

Bai Zizai was not so sure about the matter but he knew that his words were somewhat close to the original facts.

Shi Qing was speechless. Min Rou said: "Elder Bai, my senior fellow-disciple had a acquaintance with her but actually, thatThat female surnamed Mei was in unrequited love with him. She was being jealous and really hated me. She vented

her anger on my child...fate has been so cruel on my poor child"

Suddenly, Shi Potian shouted: "Ohhh... no....!" He had a strange look on his face; he said: "What's wrongHow can it be here?"

He immediately dashed to a left-hand side mountain ridge. From the start he was feeling that this mountain ridge looked really familiar. He used to see this mountain ridge as he grew up in his childhood but hasn't seen it for such a long time but he was quite sure by now that this is the same place.

His lightness martial art had improved considerably now and he immediately moved up to that mountain ridge, bypassed a stretch of grove and came near several thatched-roofed huts. He only heard the yelp sound of a yellow dog which rushed out from a hut and leapt up to his shoulder. Shi Potian held him in his arms and called happily: "A'Xiu...A'Xiu....! Come here quickly...come here.....here is my mother." He started yelling: "Mother...mother...!"

He saw three people coming out of the thatched-roofed; a middle-aged woman with yellowish complexion was in fact the mother of Shi Potian. Ding Busi and Mei Wenxin standing on either of her side.

Shi Potian shouted in ecstatic voice: "Mother!" he gave that yellow dog to A'Xiu and arrived before his mother.

That female said in a calm voice: "You came back..."

Shi Potian said: "I" he suddenly heard the voice of Min Rou coming from behind suddenly: "Mei Fanggu, you have put on makeup to hide from me? You can run away across the horizonbut today...finallyfinally...."

Shi Potian was in great surprise, he leaped quickly to block his mother's body in case they attacked and said: "Madame Shi, youYou have made a mistake, she is my mother; she can't be your personal enemy."

Shi Qing said: "Is this woman your mother?"

Shi Potian said: "Yes.... I and mother used to live in this same place.....actually one day my mother disappeared....I waited for several days but she did not come back so I went to look for her but couldn't find so I went further and further and got lost and never came back until now. This yellow dog also disappeared. You look at him...isn't he cute?" He hugged that yellow dog and got really delighted.

Shi Qing looked at the face of that ugly woman and said: "Fanggu, you already had a child then why did you kill my child?"

Although his voice sounded calm and full of tranquil to any normal person but his words were filled with bitter and astringent meaning.

That ugly faced woman Mei Fanggu, sneered and said with a smile, her stare filled with hate: "I like killing....I killed your son what does this have to do with my son...?"

Shi Potian said: "Mother, you can't be serious...why will you kill the child of Master Shi and madam Shi? Why...?"

Mei Fanggu sneered and said: "I like killing anyone...I killed him so what ...?"

Min Rou pulled out her sword slowly and said to Shi Qing: "senior fellow-disciple, I do not need you to feel embarrassed, you can stand aside. If I could not kill her then you did not need to come and help me."

Shi Qing frowned and his facial expressions were showed that he was really worried.

Bai Zizai said: "Ding Laosi, I want to make say these words first, if you husbands and wife step aside from your beloved daughter then everyone from our side will also keep restrain and won't interfere however if you two people will come forward to help your daughter then brother Shi and madam Shi has already asked for our help and we have not come to Mt. Xionger as spectators."

Ding Busi looked at them and their numerical advantage and came up with a plan immediately. He suddenly said: "Good...this will be as you said....This will be a fight between the Shi Qing couple against Mei Fanggu and Shi Potian. Both sides have a man and a woman; everybody can see a clear victory or defeat."

He and Shi Potian had fought once and he knew that the martial art skills of this young fellow were above the Shi Qing couple and if he fought alongside Mei Fanggu then they can't be defeated.

Min Rou looked at Shi Potian and said: "Little brother, you cannot stop us from taking revenge?"

Shi Potian said: "IIMadame ShiI" he suddenly knelt down and

called out: "I kowtow in front of you...Madame Shi...your conscience is best, please do not harm my mother." As he was saying these words, he kowtowed again and again with thumping sound.

Mei Fanggu shouted fiercely: "Gouzazhong...stand up....who wants you to ask favor for me to this cheap person?"

Min Rou was startled and she asked: "Why do you call him like this? HeHe is your own son. Is it possible thatIs it possible that"

She turned his head to the Shi Qing and said: "senior fellow-disciple, this young boy's facial expression and the face of our Yu'er are a perfect replica, is it possible that you and Miss Mei....?" Although she didn't complete her sentence but her meaning was obvious.

Shi Qing shook his head hastily and said: "It is not...it is not, how you can say these words?"

Bai Zizai laughed and said: "brother Shi, you did not need to be ashamed, this certainly was your own son with this woman; otherwise what kind of a woman calls her own son a Gouzazhong (bastard)? This girl surnamed Mei really hates you in her heart."

Min Rou bent her waist and put down the long sword on the ground and said: "Your three people can gather to have a reunion, II must go." As she said these words, she turned around and moved away slowly.

Shi Qing held her arm anxiously and said fiercely: "Younger sister... you... if you have doubt about me then I will first kill this cheap person and prove my innocence."

Min Rou smiled bitterly and said: "Not only this child is entirely alike our Yu'er but he also resembles you too."

Shi Qing immediately stretched his hand and attacked Mei Fanggu to stab her. Unexpectedly Mei Fanggu did not counter the attack but instead threw out her chest. He saw that the sword was going to prick her chest but Shi Potian extended his hand to deflect the attack, the sword immediately broke in to two sections.

Mei Fanggu said with a grieved smile: "Good, Shi Qing, you must kill me?"

Shi Qing said fiercely: "Fine! Mei Fanggu... I will say these words clearly to you again. In this world I have always had only one person in my heart and that is Min Rou. I Shi Qing in my entire life never ever had a relation with another woman. If you were good towards me in your heart then why would you harm me? I have already once said these words to you about 22 years ago and I am repeating those words again."

Suddenly his voice turned gentle and he spoke in a calm manner: "Fanggu, your son is grown up now....he is an outstanding talent His martial art is amazing, he will be the best martial art expert in the entire realm within a few years; his character is modest and kind. Tell me, who is his father? Why don't you speak about him?"

Shi Potian also said: "Yes, mother, who is my father? IWhat am I surnamed? Tell me... why do you call me Gouzazhong?"

Mei Fanggu said with a sad smile: "Who is your father....in this entire world... only I know."

She turned to Shi Qing and said: "Shi Qing, I already know that you have only Min Rou in your heart....this was the reason of my self-destruction and this pathetic appearance."

Shi Qing muttered: "Your self-destruction and this appearance...but why?"

Mei Fanggu said: "In the past, tell me who was more beautiful, I or that Min Rou?"

Shi Qing put out a hand to grasp his wife's palm and said with hesitation: "20 years ago, you were the most famous and beautiful woman in the martial arts world, although my wife appearance is not bad but was actually inferior to you."

Mei Fanggu showed a faint smile.

Ding Busi said: "Yes, You Shi Qing are a stupid person...who do not know good and evil, If you knew that my Fanggu is was most beautiful and better than everyone else then why didn't you love her?"

Shi Qing did not answer but gripped tightly his wife's palm, as if for fear that she will get angry and then depart again.

Mei Fanggu also asked: "In the past whose martial art was better, mine or her, who was better?"

Shi Qing said: "Your family martial art "plum blossom fist" is really strange kind of a martial art skill...."

Ding Busi again inserted his expert comments: "What strange? This is a stupid excuse, you can't be self satisfied like your Grandpa and say you do not know and were surprised due to ignorance. If you see a camel then you can't say it's just a horse with swollen back!"

Shi Qing said: "Good, your martial art skill mirrored the techniques of Ding family palm technique and plum blossom fist while at that time Min Rou was not fully versed with the Shan Qing martial art skills, so you were better."

Mei Fanggu also asked: "Then in literary skills, who was better?"

Shi Qing said: "You used to compose poem using fixed-style verses, we husband and wife were literate but have limited literary skills, how can we even compare ourselves with you!"

Shi Potian felt really strange and thought secretly: "My mother is so well versed in literary skills and martial arts...why didn't she teach me anything?"

Mei Fanggu sneered and said: "If you compare the skill of needlework or the essence of culinary skills; was I inferior to your younger sister Min."

Shi Qing shook his head and said: "My wife cannot even patch a piece of cloth or sew the garments properly; she can fry the eggs but not much else, how can she be compared to you on these skills?"

Mei Fanggu said fiercely: "Then look at us and tell me, why is that I am stuck here with this icy face and did not have any good times in past so many years but look at your younger sister Min Rou, she still looks the same as earlier and is actually much happy? WhyWhy" As she spoke her voice sound trembled and got really excited but face still was wooden and none of the muscle move.

Shi Qing said slowly: "Madam Mei, I do not know. You were better than my younger sister in every kind...not only her but me too...you were stronger than me. When I was with you then I always felt inferior to you, this is why I couldn't stay with you.

Mei Fanggu got lost in thought for half of the day; she cried and rushed back into the thatched roofed hut. Mei Wenxin and Ding Busi followed her.

Min Rou sighed and said to Shi Qing: "senior fellow-disciple, Madam Mei is a cruel fated person, although she has killed our children, II am much happier than her, I know in your heart that you always were true to me...we should leave....this enmity did not need to be avenged."

Shi Qing said: "We don't need to avenge the death of our child?"

Min Rou said mournfully: "Killing her now won't make things any different...forgive her."

Suddenly they heard the sound of Ding Busi yelling: "Fanggu....why do you have to be so shortsighted? Why do you have to kill yourself!"

Shi Qing and others were surprised.

They only saw Mei Wenxin coming out holding the body of Mei Fanggu in her arms. The sleeve of the left arm was held high, it revealed her snow white tender and delicate skin and a scarlet spot on it. This was actually a virgin's spot.

Mei Wenxin said in her grating voice: "Mei Fanggu maintained her moral integrity, until now she was still a virgin; obviously this Gouzazhong is not her son."

Everyone looked at Shi Potian; their heart filled with suspicion: "Mei Fanggu is a maiden so naturally she cannot be his mother. Who then is his mother? Who is his father? Why did Mei Fanggu confess that she was his mother?"

Shi Qing and Min Rou thought: "Was it that when Mei Fanggu captured our newborn son in the past, she hasn't killed him? Afterward she sent us a corpse of some other child covered with blood with same clothes? If this young boy was not our son then why did she call him Gouzazhong? How can he and Yu'er resemble so much?"

Shi Potian was confused and thought: "Who is my father? Who is my mother? Who am I?"

Since Mei Fanggu had committed suicide, there were so many questions but no one alive to answer...

We live with several unanswered question...sometimes we die with them too ...

THE END

Second edition changes

Ode to Gallantry was written in 1965 and revised several years later in the 1970s.

One of the more prominent changes in the revised edition concerned the name of the island from which the Twin Emissaries of Rewards and Punishments came. Since the novel was called *Xiake Xing* (literally, 'The Way of Heroes'), the island was renamed *Xiake Dao*, or Isle of Heroes. In the original work, the island was called Longmu Island, after its two discoverers-cum-owners, Mr Long and Mr Mu.

Wu Daotong, the holder of the Black Steel Symbol who was subsequently killed by Zhou Mu from the Golden Sabre Stockade in Chapter 1, was [strangely] a woman in the first edition. However, the character became a man in the second edition.

Third edition changes

Athena

There are hardly any changes at all, like Jin Yong wrote in his epilogue. He just merely changed some dialogues to make it more fluent. Nothing else has changed; the ending is the same.

The most noticable changes I saw were:

The maid of Shi Potian, Shijian, does not get killed. She only gets her acupoints sealed this time. Shi Potian managed to stop Ding Dang from killing her.

When Shi Qing tells Shi Potian about what Zhang San and Li Si did, he mentioned a certain Taoist priest melting copper plaques with his internal energy. In the previous edition this Taoist priest was the leader of the Qingcheng School, but now he is/was the leader of the Kongtong School.

Shi Potian is very much certain that he only loves A'Xiu and not Ding Dang.

HYS

In Chapter 6, the surname of the former clan-leader to whom Shi Potian is purportedly a nephew-at-arms, is confirmed to be Situ (presumably, the immediate past clan-leader, Situ Heng, mentioned in Chapter 3).

In selected imprints of the 2nd edition, the surname Dongfang had been used instead of Situ.

+ + +

In Chapter 7, Bai Wanjian orders three of his brothers-at-arms to remain in Zhenjiang City and gather information about the Clan of Eternal Happiness. These three brothers-at-arms are now confirmed to be surnamed Zhang, Qian and Zhao.

In the 2nd edition, the three were surnamed Zhang, Wang and Zhao. This caused some confusion as to whether there was more than one Wang (王 Wang2, not 汪 Wang1) in that particular group of disciples from the Snow Mountain School, because the known Wang, Wang Wanren, had been seriously wounded and captured by the Clan of Eternal Happiness in Chapter 6.

+ + +

In Chapter 9, the old woman Xiaocui instructs Shi Potian to exercise his internal strength through the Hand Shaoyang Channel of the Three Visceral Cavities. In the 2nd edition, the channel was erroneously named as the Hand

Shaoyang Channel of the Gall Bladder.

In addition, some of the dialogue between Shi Potian, Xiaocui and Ding Busi has been extended in the 3rd edition. Details are found in the footnotes to the chapter.